

The Motor Girls In The Mountains



The Motor Girls' Series

BY

Margaret Penrose

The adventures of Cora Kimball and her friends are many and varied. They go on auto tours, spend vacations by the seashore and even take a yachting trip to the West Indies.

While their adventures are exciting enough for the veriest tomboy, the distinctive feminine appeal is not lacking.

Cora and her friends are, in the final analysis, just wholesome, everyday girls. In spite of their unusual adventures their daily lives are filled with the sort of activity that every girl knows and enjoys.

They design clothes, they shop for the newest in hats and they give marvelously clever parties.

What girl doesn't enjoy these things? What girl doesn't enjoy reading about them?

6
Mildred Libert
from Mother
Dec. 25, 1929

THE MOTOR GIRLS IN THE MOUNTAINS

Or

The Gypsy Girl's Secret

BY
MARGARET PENROSE



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THE MOTOR GIRLS IN THE MOUNTAINS

CHAPTER I

BREAKING THE SPEED LIMIT

"SAY, girls, isn't this the best thing ever?"

Cora Kimball, the girl whose hand was on the wheel of the motor car as it sped swiftly along a sun-flecked country road, put the words in the form of a question, but they were really an exclamation drawn from her by sheer delight in living. She was gloriously indifferent as to an answer, but the answer came just the same from the two pretty girls who occupied the seat behind her.

"It's perfectly grand!" cried Belle Robinson, the more slender of the two, as she snuggled down still more luxuriously in the soft cushions of the automobile.

"It seems to me yet as though it must be a dream," declared her twin sister Bess, who was considerably larger than either of her companions. "Pinch me, somebody, so that I can be sure it's real."

Cora reached over mischievously and took her at her word.

Bess drew back with a little squeal.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed. "You took a piece out that time!"

"Well, what if I did?" laughed Cora. "You can spare a little without missing it."

"You ought to be thankful to Cora for helping you to reduce," put in her sister slyly.

Bess flushed a trifle, for her "plumpness"—she abominated the word "stout" and avoided it as if it were the plague—was rather a tender point with her.

"I don't care for such drastic methods," she retorted. "I'd rather take the flesh off more gradually. Besides," she added with a show of pride, "I'm going down quite fast enough as it is. I'm two pounds lighter than I was last week."

"Swell chance you have of getting thinner when you will keep nibbling at chocolate creams," remarked her sister unbelievably. "You might hand some over, you stingy thing, instead of keeping them all to yourself."

"No such thing!" denied Bess, producing a small box. "They're lemon drops, and everybody knows *they* don't make you"—she was going to say "fat," but checked herself just in time to substitute "plump."

"Slip one into my mouth, Belle," commanded

Cora. "I don't dare to take my hand from the wheel."

"I noticed that you took it away fast enough when you wanted to pinch me," remarked Bess.

"That was different," returned Cora. "You asked me to, and I'd do a good deal to oblige a friend."

"Heaven save me from my friends," sighed Bess, and then they all laughed.

For laughter came easy on a day like this. The sun of early August was tempered by a light breeze that removed any suspicion of sultriness. The road was a good one, and Cora's car under her expert guidance glided along with scarcely a jar. Great trees on either side provided a grateful shade. Squirrels scolded noisily in the branches, and here and there a chipmunk slipped like a shadow along the fences and the hum of the locusts filled the air with a dreamy harmony. A bobolink flitted across the road, dropping a whole sheaf of silver notes from his joyous throat. It was a day on which it was good to be alive.

"To think that we're really on our way to the Adirondacks," murmured Belle delightedly. "I've wanted to go there ever since I wore pigtails."

"And to Camp Kill Kare," said Bess. "The very name seems to promise all kinds of fun."

"Doesn't it?" agreed Cora. "And how much

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more fun it is to go this way than in stuffy old railway cars."

"Are you sure we can get there by to-morrow night?" asked Belle.

"We can if nothing happens to the car," answered Cora. "It's in splendid shape now, and we're fairly eating up the miles. Of course, if it rains and the roads get muddy it may take us a little longer. But after all the rain we had last week, I guess we can be sure of good weather. There isn't a cloud in the sky now."

"Did you finally decide to stay at your Aunt Margaret's house to-night?" asked Bess.

"Yes," replied Cora. "Isn't it lucky that her home is just about half-way on our trip? If it hadn't been for that, we'd have had to bring a chaperon along with us, and that would have been a nuisance. I suppose they are a necessary evil, but I'm awfully glad when we get a chance to do without one."

"I suppose your Aunt Betty will be at Kill Kare when we get there," remarked Belle.

"She's already there," answered Cora. "We got a letter from her yesterday, saying that everything was all ready for us and that she was just dying to see us. And with Aunt Betty in mind, I'll take back what I said about chaperons. She's a perfect dear, and I'm sure you girls will fall dead in love with her."

"I've no doubt we shall," answered Bess. "I'm prepared to love her just from your description. But say, girls," she continued, glancing at her wrist watch, "do you know that it's after twelve o'clock? Don't you think we'd better be looking about for some place to stop to get lunch?"

"Hear that girl talk!" mocked Cora. "And she's the one that's always talking about reducing!"

"Oh, that this too, too solid flesh might melt," quoted Belle.

"If the truth were known, I'll wager I don't eat as much as either of you two," retorted Bess. "I had only a cup of coffee and two rolls this morning."

"You had more than two rolls," declared Belle. "I counted them and there were at least ten."

"What do you mean, Belle Robinson?" asked Bess, turning to her sister in bewilderment.

"Rolls on the floor, I mean," explained Belle, "when you were going through your reducing exercises."

Bess turned her eyes to heaven in mute appeal.

"My own sister giving me away!" she moaned. "Well, our relatives are wished on us, but thank goodness I can choose my friends."

"Stop your scrapping, girls," interposed Cora, "and listen to me. There isn't any hotel in sight, and even if there were, who wants to go indoors

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on a day like this? Mary put up a splendid lunch before we started. What's the matter with dining *al fresco*?"

"Listen to the girl!" exclaimed Belle. "What does she mean by that?"

"Sounds to me like a sleight of hand performer," murmured Bess.

"You're thinking of 'presto change,'" laughed Cora. "No, my benighted sisters. To put the thing in terms that your limited intelligence can grasp, I meant that we would eat in the open air."

"Good!" exclaimed Belle.

"Right here in the car?" asked Bess.

"Why, we could," answered Cora; "but don't you think it would be better yet to find some nice little place by the side of the road? I'm a little cramped from sitting so long, and I suppose you are too. It will do us good to have a change."

"Let's choose some place where there's a brook or a spring," suggested Bess. "I'm dreadfully thirsty."

"Been eating too many lemon drops," said Belle.

"No more than you," retorted Bess.

"No. But, gracious, that's too many," sighed her sister. "Less candy and more sandwiches for me when we are in the open air like this! Come, where's that brook?"

"I've no doubt we can find such a place," ob-

served Cora, as she put a little extra speed in the car. "You girls keep your eyes open and tell me when to stop. I've got all I can do to watch the road and save some dog or chicken from untimely death."

Not many minutes had elapsed before Belle reached over and touched Cora's arm.

"The very spot!" she exclaimed. "There's a brook and some trees that were just intended for a picnic party."

Cora guided the car to the side of the road. The girls got out and stretched their cramped limbs with a sigh of relief. The lunch basket was taken from beneath the seat and carried to a cool and shady spot beneath a clump of great trees that stood a few feet away from the road. From a brook that rippled over the stones with a musical murmur, they brought a supply of water. A robe from the car was spread out on the grass, and napkins from the basket served as miniature tablecloths.

Then Mary's offerings were brought to light, and amply maintained that person's reputation for culinary skill. Lettuce sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, fried chicken legs, lemon tarts and fruit followed each other in rapid succession. Then, too, there was a thermos bottle filled with hot, fragrant coffee.

Their morning in the open air had sharpened

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the appetites of the girls, and they ate with a zest that would have made a dyspeptic turn green with envy. Bess, to be sure, tried feebly to bear in mind her rules for dieting, but the temptation was too great, and for that once anyway her good resolutions went by the board.

"I could die happy now," she murmured, between bites of a lemon tart.

"You will die anyway if you eat much more," said her sister severely. "Bess Robinson, I'm ashamed of you."

"You'll have to take twenty rolls to-morrow instead of ten, to make up for this," laughed Cora.

"To-morrow's a new day," replied Bess mutinously. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

"She's a hopeless case, I'm afraid," sighed Belle. "But come along now, girls, and gather up these things. We want to get to the house of Cora's aunt before it gets dark."

"Behold a stranger cometh," remarked Cora, as a horse and buggy came in sight, with a young man holding the reins.

The vehicle approached rapidly, and the eyes of the driver lighted up as he caught sight of the three girls. Instead of driving by, he reined up at the roadside and jumping from the buggy made his way toward the little party.

He was of medium height, flashily dressed, and

had a weak, dissipated-looking face. The girls had risen to their feet and drawn a little closer together as he approached.

He took off his hat and bowed, with a smile that he tried to make ingratiating.

"I see I'm in luck," he remarked. "Just in time to have a bite of lunch, if there's any left."

Cora, to whom the other girls looked for leadership, froze him with a glance.

"If you're hungry, you can probably get something to eat at the next town," she said. "We haven't anything for tramps."

The man flushed uncomfortably, and his impudent assurance went down several degrees beneath her stare.

"What's the use of being so stiff?" he expostulated. "I'm only trying to be friendly."

"That's just what we object to," replied Cora. "We don't want your friendship. My brother will be along shortly, and perhaps he will appreciate it more than we do."

The young man cast a hurried glance up and down the road. It was evident that, however strong his craving for feminine society, he had no desire to meet the brother.

"Oh, well," he muttered, as he made his way toward the buggy, "you needn't be so quick to take offence. There are plenty of girls who would be glad of my company."

And with this, that was meant to be a Parthian shot, but that only provoked a nervous desire to laugh on the part of the girls, he gathered up the reins and drove off.

They saw him go with immense relief, for there was no other man in sight, and his impudence had alarmed as well as offended them.

"Well, of all the nerve!" ejaculated Belle.

"You certainly can freeze when you want to, Cora," laughed Bess.

"How lucky it was that you thought of Jack," said Belle. "Did you see the frightened look that came into his eyes?"

"That sort of man always is a coward," replied Cora. "Perhaps he won't be so free and easy when he meets girls alone again. But let's get busy now and hustle these things back into the car."

They soon had the thermos bottle and the depleted lunch basket tucked snugly away. The twins settled down in the rear seat, Cora threw in the clutch, and the car started.

They had gone perhaps a mile, when they descried a car coming at a rapid rate from the opposite direction.

"That man seems to be trying to break the speed limit," remarked Cora, as she drove her own car close to the right-hand side of the road so as to give plenty of room.

"Like Jehu, the son of Nimshi, he driveth furiously," observed Belle.

Just then the gate of a near-by farmhouse was pushed open, and a little child about three years old toddled out into the road, right in the path of the onrushing car.

A shriek went up from the girls.

"Oh, girls," screamed Bess, rising from her seat, "that child will be killed!"

CHAPTER II

QUICK THINKING

FOR one tense moment it seemed as though nothing could avert a terrible tragedy.

A woman burst out of the house and ran screaming toward her child. But it was clearly impossible for her to reach the little one in time to save it.

The child, startled by the screams, stood helplessly right in the path of the Juggernaut that seemed doomed to crush it.

The driver of the car had seen the danger, and he instantly threw out the clutch and put on the brakes. But he was too near to stop in time.

There was only one thing to do, and, like a gallant man, he did it. He whirled the wheel around, and the car, its speed diminished but still considerable, dashed into a tree by the side of the road. The driver, an elderly man, was thrown out and lay stunned and bleeding.

The mother rushed to the little one and gath-

ered it up into her arms with sobs and exclamations.

The girls, who had been unable to move and had sat paralyzed with horror, breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"Thank God, the baby's saved!" cried Bess.

"Yes," exclaimed Cora, "but the man may be killed! Let's see what we can do to help him."

The three girls jumped from the car and rushed over to the injured man.

While the girls are giving first aid to the man, and the mother is crying and crooning over her child, it may be well for the sake of those who have not followed our Motor Girls in their previous adventures to state a little more fully just who they were and what they had been doing up to the time this story opens.

Cora Kimball and her brother Jack—the same Jack who had been brought in so handily in their encounter with the impudent young man—were the children of a wealthy widow living in Chelton, a New England village located not very far from the New York line. They were both healthy, normal, wideawake young people, and took vast delight in motoring. Either in a motor car or a motor boat they were equally happy and equally at home; and Cora was quite as expert in managing them as her brother.

Cora's special chums were Belle and Bess Robin-

son, twin daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Perry Robinson, the former a well-to-do railroad man, living in the same town as the Kimballs. Belle, as we have seen, was tall and slender—"svelte" was the way she liked to put it. And Bess—well, Bess was "plump," but a very pretty and charming girl nevertheless. Of the three girls, Cora was the natural leader, and the trio were almost inseparable.

Jack Kimball, Cora's brother, was a manly, likable chap and devotedly attached to his sister, although at times he liked to "lord it" over her with truly masculine complacency. He was a student at Exmouth College, and his most intimate friend was Walter Pennington, who spent most of his vacations and whatever other spare time he had at the Kimball home. Perhaps Jack's charming sister was the special magnet that drew Walter there so often—— But there, it isn't fair to delve too curiously into matters of that kind.

Paul Hastings, who had a position in an automobile concern, was a close friend of Jack and Walter, and the girls too liked him very much.

The love of motoring that all six, boys and girls alike, shared in common had led to many trips to various parts of the country, in the course of which they had met with many surprising and sometimes thrilling adventures. Both Cora and the Robinson twins had cars of their own, but as

Cora seemed to take the lead in everything, most of the tours were taken in her car.

Their trips took them at one time or another to almost every section of the interior and the coast. At Lookout Beach, through New England, on Cedar Lake, at Crystal Bay, on the coast, even as far as the West Indies, all that happened to them on these expeditions, and it was much, is told in the previous volumes of the series.

In the volume immediately preceding this one, called "The Motor Girls at Camp Surprise," a number of very strange happenings are recorded. To begin with, Cora's car was stolen and she was almost inconsolable, for though her mother would have bought her one to replace it, she had an affectionate attachment for the old one that had so many happy memories connected with it. They found no real track of the thieves until, when they were spending the early part of the summer at Camp Surprise, they came across a gang of ticket counterfeiters, who had set up their plant in an underground passage leading from the very house where the girls were staying.

And now, as the reader has seen, the girls were on their way to spend the late summer in the heart of the Adirondacks. And right at the outset they had been witnesses of what was so nearly a tragedy that for the moment their hearts had stood still.

All alert, now that their terror for the child's safety was dispelled, the girls hurried over to the driver, who still lay stretched out in the road. As they approached he opened his eyes and looked about him in a dazed way.

"The child," he murmured, as he brushed his hand over his forehead. "Is it safe?"

"It's all right," replied Cora cheerily, immensely relieved to find that the driver was not dead, as she had feared. "But don't try to talk now until you feel a little stronger."

She knelt down and took his head upon her knee.

"Run to the house, girls, and get some water," she commanded, taking charge of things, as she always did in a crisis.

The farmer's wife, who had now got back some of her self-control, led the way into the house, and in a moment the girls were back with plenty of cool water and some linen. Cora washed a cut in the man's head, deftly tied a bandage around it, and put some water to his lips, which he drank eagerly.

The cut was not a serious one, and the farmer, who had joined the group, announced after a brief examination that no bones seemed to be broken. He was urgent that the man should be taken into the house and a doctor sent for, but the injured man, who was getting stronger by the minute and

seemed to have a very determined will of his own, vetoed this emphatically.

"There's nothing the matter with me except for the shock and a few bruises," he declared. "I'll be as well as ever as soon as this dizziness passes away."

He proved himself a true prophet, for at the end of ten minutes he was on his feet and looking ruefully at his car.

"Pretty much of a wreck, I imagine," he remarked with a twisted smile, as he walked around it and took stock of the damage.

The girls joined in the inspection, and as they knew as much about automobiles as the man himself, they satisfied themselves that he had not exaggerated much in describing it as a "wreck." The wheels and part of the body were intact, but the machinery was badly knocked out of gear. It was clear that it would not be able to go under its own power.

"There's a garage a few miles further on," the stranger remarked. "I'll have to leave word there and have them come back to get it."

"No need of doing that," volunteered Cora. "We're going in that direction, and we'll be glad to tow you there."

The man hesitated.

"It's very good of you," he replied, "but I'm afraid I've taxed your kindness too far already."

"It won't be any trouble at all," returned Cora cordially. "You can sit in the front seat with me, and as my car is a powerful one we'll be able to tow yours easily."

He demurred a little longer, but finally accepted the offer with hearty thanks. The farmer brought out a rope, and with the aid of a couple of farm hands got the wrecked machine out in the road. Then the two cars were connected and the girls started off, with a parting wave of the hand and a smile directed especially to the little toddler, who was held tightly in the mother's arm.

"That child won't be allowed to go out of the gate alone again in a hurry, I guess," laughed Belle.

"It wasn't the child's fault," remarked the stranger. "I was going altogether too fast. If I'd been moving at a moderate rate I could have stopped in plenty of time. Fact is, I was thinking of something else—none too pleasant thoughts they were either—and I didn't realize just how fast I was going."

"You were very lucky to get off as well as you did, Mr.——" Cora hesitated inquiringly.

"Morley," supplemented the stranger. "Bless my heart, here I am accepting all this service from you young ladies and forgetting to introduce myself. Samuel Morley is my name, and I live in the town of Saxton, about twenty miles from here.

Yes, as you were saying, I was very lucky to get off as well as I did—a good deal luckier than I deserved. Though perhaps it would have been just as well if I had been killed after all.”

He brought out the last sentence so savagely that the girls were startled.

“You mustn’t mind what I say,” he said apologetically, as he noted the look on their faces. “I’m just a crabbed old stick anyway. If I hadn’t been that, I wouldn’t have so many painful memories now. Sometimes they come crowding in upon me until it seems as though I couldn’t stand them. But I wouldn’t want to say anything that would shadow the faces of young girls. There was a young girl once——”

He caught himself up sharply.

“But here I am doing all the talking,” he said. “That’s a sign I’m getting old. Now suppose you girls turn the tables. Tell me all about yourselves and where you are going.”

The conversation became general then, and from that time on he carefully refrained from saying anything bearing on himself, although the girls, who scented a romance or a tragedy somewhere, would gladly have forborne their own talk in order to hear more of his story.

“There’s the garage over there,” he said, as they drew near the outskirts of a town, pointing to a low building on the right.

Cora drove her car close in and the keeper of the garage came out and unfastened the rope that bound the two machines.

"I can't thank you young ladies enough," Mr. Morley said gratefully, as he shook hands with them. "I only hope the time will come when I can repay the favor."

"Are you feeling all right now?" asked Cora, as she got ready to throw in the clutch.

"Nothing worse than a headache. You're a first-class doctor," he replied with a twinkle in his eye.

Cora laughed.

"Don't tell any one," she admonished. "It might get me into trouble. You know, I haven't a license to practise in this state."

CHAPTER III

THE MISSING PURSE

"WHAT queer things that man said about himself," remarked Belle, as she settled back in her seat.

"I was wild to have him go on," replied her sister. "I'm sure he's got a romance or a mystery of some kind in his life."

"Did you see how suddenly he checked himself when he started to talk about that girl?" asked Cora.

"Perhaps it was some girl whom he intended to marry," said Bess, who had a strong vein of sentiment in her composition.

"Well, we'll never get a chance to know," observed Belle. "We've probably seen Mr. Samuel Morley for the first and last time."

"I don't know about that," rejoined Cora. "I have a sort of feeling that we'll run across him again."

"Listen to the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter," mocked Belle.

"Sybilla, the reader of the mystic sphere, the gazer into the crystal globe!" gibed Bess.

"I'm no prophetess," disclaimed Cora. "I just have a feeling that way. Perhaps I'll have the laugh on you scoffers yet."

"We're willing to wait," returned Belle. "Just now it's the present more than the future that I'm worrying about. That Good Samaritan act of ours has taken up a good deal of time. And you know that we planned to stop in that department store when we get to Roxbury and buy some of the things we came away without in our hurry this morning. I've simply got to have that chiffon."

"And I need a new box of powder," put in Bess. "My old one is nearly empty."

"Such victims of the vanity of this world," sighed Cora. "But don't worry, girls. I'll throw in a little extra speed and you'll hear the car fairly purr."

"Not too fast," cautioned Belle. "After what we saw to-day in the way of fast driving, I'm willing to go a little slower."

"I'll be careful," promised Cora; "but all the same we can afford to go a good deal faster than we are moving now."

She threw in more speed, and the gallant car responded at once with scarcely an added vibration. In a short time Roxbury was in sight, and

turning into one of the main streets, they drew up before the doors of the leading store of the town.

They went at once to the veiling department, where Belle purchased her chiffon. That and the powder that Bess secured in the drug department completed all the buying that they had intended to do. But they were true daughters of Eve, and so many things met their eyes that they were sure they simply could not do without, that before they knew it they had bought quite extensively.

They were standing at one of the counters, waiting for their change, which seemed an unconscionable time in coming.

"Even Job would have lost patience if there had been department stores in his day," remarked Belle.

"But there *were* department stores then," replied Cora.

"What do you mean?" asked Bess.

"There must have been," said Cora. "Don't you remember where Job says: 'All the days of my life will I wait till my change come'?"

The girls laughed, but the laugh quickly faded when Cora gave a startled exclamation:

"Oh, girls, I've lost my purse!"

"You don't mean it!" cried Belle.

"Are you sure?" asked Bess.

"I had it in my hand just a minute ago," replied Cora in much agitation. "I took that ten dollar

bill out of it that they're making change for now. I must have laid it down for a minute, and now it's gone."

There were a number of bolts of cloth on the counter near which the girls were standing, and they made a hurried search among them without result.

"And I had nearly a hundred dollars in it," mourned Cora. "Will you please help me look for my purse?" she asked of the man behind the counter, who had been standing with his back toward them, busily packing pieces of cloth on the shelves.

He turned toward them, rather reluctantly the girls thought, and they were startled to find themselves looking into the eyes of the young man who had annoyed them while they were lunching at the roadside.

A flush suffused his face as the girls looked at him coldly.

"What can I do for you, ladies?" he asked, in an obsequious tone that was in strong contrast with the impudent one he had used a few hours before.

"I've lost my purse about here somewhere," said Cora, "and as it had a considerable sum of money in it I am very anxious to have it found."

He was profuse in his expressions of regret, and began with apparent eagerness to turn over all the

goods on the counter, while the girls watched anxiously. But there was no sign of the purse to be seen.

Just then the manager of the store came along, an alert, keen-eyed man, and seeing the little commotion about the counter, asked courteously if he could be of any assistance.

He listened carefully to what Cora had to say. "It's singular," he said. "There doesn't seem from what you say to have been anybody standing close by within the last few minutes. Are you quite sure that you had the purse when you came to this counter?"

"Positive," replied Cora. "I haven't moved from here since I took the bill out of the purse to pay for the goods I bought."

"Have you made a careful search, Higby?" asked the manager, fixing his sharp eyes upon the clerk as though he would read him through and through.

"Yes, sir," replied Higby; "but I'll go through the goods again to make sure."

He tossed the bolts of cloth about vigorously, and after a moment gave an exclamation of triumph.

"Here it is!" he cried. "Is this your purse, miss?" he asked, holding the article out to Cora.

The latter pounced upon it with a little squeal of delight.

"Oh, yes, that's it!" she exclaimed. "Thank you ever so much."

"You would better look over the money to make sure it is all there," suggested the manager.

Cora ran hastily over the roll of bills.

"It's all right," she announced in a tone of relief.

The manager expressed his gratification at its recovery, coupled with an expression of regret at the annoyance she had suffered, and the missing change having come by this time, the girls hurriedly gathered their purchases together and left the store.

"You lucky girl!" exclaimed Belle, as Cora started the car.

"Luckier than I deserve," laughed Cora happily. "It was awfully careless of me to let the purse out of my hand for a second. It would have served me right if I had lost it."

"Do you think you really lost it?" asked Belle significantly.

The girls looked at each other, and it was evident that the same thought was shared by all.

"Perhaps it seems mean to say it," remarked Cora slowly, "but since you ask me, I must say that the whole thing looks queer. There was the way he kept his back to us when we were looking for it on our own account. But I don't lay so much weight on that, because he might have recog-

nized us and felt a little sheepish after the way we took him down this afternoon. But why couldn't he have found it before the manager came along, and why did he find it so promptly when the manager was standing there watching him? Of course, it might have been mixed up in the folds of the cloth the first time, and dropped out when he went over the goods again the second time. I suppose anyway we ought to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"He doesn't get the benefit of the doubt from me," said Bess in so emphatic a manner that the others, accustomed to her easy-going ways, looked at her in astonishment.

"You hard-hearted thing!" exclaimed her sister.

"What do you mean?" asked Cora.

"Listen, my children, and you shall hear," began Bess in her best manner. "I kept my eye on that young gentleman——"

"The Gorgon stare," murmured her sister.

"When he was turning those bolts of cloth the second time," went on Bess, disdaining to dignify the interruption by noticing it, "and while he was fumbling them with one hand, I saw him bring up the purse from beneath the counter with the other hand and slip it under the cloth. Then, before I could say anything, he called out that he had found it. I could have shaken you when you thanked him so sweetly, Cora Kimball."

The girls looked at each other aghast.

"Did you ever?" gasped Belle.

"He ought to be exposed!" exclaimed Cora indignantly.

"I suppose he ought," agreed Bess placidly. "But after all, the proof wouldn't be strong enough. It would be simply my word against his, and he'd swear black and blue that I was mistaken. We'd only get mixed up in an ugly mess, and nothing would come of it after all. I fancy that that young man will get to the end of his rope soon enough without our having anything to do with it. Thank your lucky stars, Cora, that you've got your money back, and let it go at that."

"To think of Bess playing sleuth and tracking crime to its lair!" cried Belle. "I didn't think she had it in her."

"Oh, I'm some little bright-eyes, if you ask me," remarked Bess complacently, as she reached out for the last of the lemon drops.

"We'll have to work this up into amateur theatricals when the boys join us," laughed Cora.

"Yes," agreed Belle, "we'll stage a one-act play and call it: 'The Greed of Gold; or, Bess Robinson, the Girl Detective.'"

CHAPTER IV

THE STERNER SEX

"TALKING of the boys——" began Bess.

"Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh," drawled her sister.

Bess flushed.

"You think of them just as much as I do, Belle Robinson, and perhaps more!" she countered. "But what I was going to say when I was so rudely interrupted was to wonder when they were ever going to catch up with us."

"Jack said they'd surely overtake us before night," replied Cora. "Walter and he were all ready, but Paul had had some things to wind up for his firm before he started in on his vacation. He had telegraphed, though, that he would be in Chelton before noon, and Jack said he'd show us just how fast that car of his could travel. He's awfully proud of that car, but between us, girls, I don't think he has anything on this car of mine in the matter of speed," and she patted the wheel affectionately.

"Let's hope they don't get arrested for speeding," said Belle.

"Or run over any babies," put in Bess, with a lively recollection of the thrilling episode of the afternoon.

"I guess there's no danger of that," said Cora. "Jack's keen on speed, but he's a careful driver for all that. I tell you what we'll do, girls. You keep a sharp lookout in the rear, for they may come into sight at any minute now, and the minute you see them coming you let me know. Then I'll let out a little and we'll try to tease them by keeping just far enough ahead of them to drive them crazy."

"That'll be dandy!" said Belle eagerly. "It'll do them good to take some of the conceit out of them. I suppose they think we've been pining to have them with us."

"Well, haven't you?" asked Bess mischievously.

"No, I haven't," declared Belle, but in a tone that somehow failed to carry conviction.

"That looks like their car now!" cried Bess excitedly, as she caught a glimpse of an automobile that had just swung around a curve in the road about half a mile in the rear.

Belle craned her neck in the same direction.

"I guess it is," she confirmed. "I can make out three people in it, but they're too far away to see their faces."

"We'll let them get a little nearer so we can make sure," said Cora, settling herself in her seat and taking a tighter grasp on the wheel, "and then we'll let them take our dust and see how they like it."

Belle knelt upon the seat to get a better view.

"Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see a man?" chanted Bess.

"Three of them," replied Belle, "and they're coming like all possessed. I'm almost sure it's Jack that's driving. There, one of them has taken out a handkerchief and is waving it!"

"It's them," pronounced Belle a moment later, forgetting her grammar in her excitement, and scrambling back into her seat again. "Now, Cora, it's up to you to show them what the Motor Girls can do."

"See that your hats are on tight, girls," laughed Cora. "We're going to stir up some little breeze."

They had a long stretch of road in front of them at the time, with no house or vehicle in sight. The conditions could not have been better for a race, and Cora increased her speed gradually until the car was going like the wind.

The car behind had taken up the challenge at once and was also coming along at a tremendous rate. But Belle, venturing sundry peeks behind, announced gleefully that it was not gaining an inch.

"But that isn't enough," Cora flung back. "We want to make them actually drop farther behind. When we've once done that I'll be satisfied. Then we'll slow up and let them catch up to us."

Two minutes later, Belle clapped her hands in delight.

"We've done it! We've done it!" she cried. "They're a quarter of a mile farther back than they were when we started in."

"Oh, how we'll rub it into them!" gurgled Bess.

"Well, enough is as good as a feast," laughed Cora, in great satisfaction. "Now we'll give the lords of creation a chance to explain how they came to let mere girls run away from them."

"It will take some explanation," remarked Belle.

"They're great little explainers, though," said Bess. "They'd rather die than admit we had the faster car."

Cora gradually slackened speed until the car, while still running swiftly, had reached a more reasonable rate. Belle's glances behind told her that their pursuers were overtaking them by leaps and bounds.

A moment later there was a wild chorus of shouts, and Jack's car drew up alongside. His two friends, Walter Pennington and Paul Hastings, were with him, both tall, athletic young fellows, with frank, pleasant faces.

The girls looked up with well simulated surprise, and pleasure that was not at all simulated.

"Why, it's the boys!" they cried in chorus.

Both cars had by this time come to a full stop, and the masculine contingent, deserting theirs, came round to the girls' car to greet them and to shake hands. Jack went further and gave his sister a hearty kiss, a proceeding which brought a look of envy to the faces of his companions.

"Where in the world have you slowpokes been?" asked Belle.

"Not much of a compliment, keeping away from us so long," pouted Bess in a way to show a most bewitching dimple.

"I guess they've been glad enough to be rid of us for a while," chimed in Cora.

Looks full of reproach and denial greeted this onslaught.

"That's pretty good!" remarked Paul.

"Rich!" assented Walter.

"Just as if we hadn't been breaking speed laws all day long in order to overtake you," mourned Jack.

"What's the use of living when you're so misunderstood?" groaned Walter.

"After all the ice-creams and sodas we've blown in on these girls, too!" wailed Paul.

"Let's find a hole somewhere and crawl away and die," suggested Jack.

"It seems to me that the shoe's on the other foot anyway," said Walter, becoming accuser in his turn. "It's you who didn't want us. Who was it just now that was trying to run away from us?"

"Run away from you?" repeated Cora innocently. "What do you mean by that?"

"You know perfectly well, you little minx," said her brother with mock sternness. "There we were, waving handkerchiefs at you and hustling the old machine along to beat the band. I know you saw us, for one of you was looking back."

"I did see some one waving a handkerchief," admitted Belle. "But it looked as though some ill-bred person was trying to flirt with us, and of course we didn't pay the least attention."

"No," said Bess primly, "we'd die before we'd flirt."

"If we'd wanted to flirt we had a perfectly good chance to-day while we were eating lunch," said Cora. "He had a perfectly lovely necktie, too, a good deal brighter than any of yours."

Jack threw up his hands with a gesture of despair.

"No use, fellows!" he exclaimed. "You can't pin them down to anything."

"But what did you have to wave your handkerchief for anyway to make us stop?" asked Cora demurely. "All you had to do was to put on more

speed and catch up to us. That car of yours is so fast, you know. At least that's what you've always said."

The boys looked at each other a little disconcertedly.

"W-well," stammered Jack, "the oil—the sparking wasn't working just right——"

"Tell the truth, Jack," spoke up Walter, with a fine assumption of candor. "The real reason, girls, was that we were afraid of bumping into you——"

"And we didn't want to spill you all over the road," finished Paul.

A groan went up from the girls.

"Oh, Ananias!" exclaimed Bess.

"Ananias, you mean," corrected her sister. "One's just as bad as the others. They all hang together."

"We're like Ben Franklin when he signed the Declaration of Independence," laughed Paul. "He said they'd all have to hang together or they'd hang separately."

"I'll admit that you have a good car, sis," said Jack.

"And if that isn't enough to take us back into favor, we'll do anything else you say," said Walter, wringing his hands in pretended agitation.

"We'll put on sackcloth and ashes, jump through a hoop, roll over and play dead," chimed in Paul.

"No one has anything on us when it comes to humility."

"It almost affects me to tears," said Belle, pretending to reach for her handkerchief.

"They say cruel and unusual punishments are prohibited by the Constitution," laughed Cora, "so we won't deprive you of the refining influence of our society. Heaven knows you need it badly enough. We'll let you trail along with us if you'll promise to be very, very good."

"We will," promised Jack.

"There's one thing yet that needs to be explained, fellows," remarked Walter, as they climbed into their automobile. "What about that fellow with the iridescent necktie? I feel the demon of jealousy gnawing at my vitals."

"Come, girls, 'fess up," admonished Jack.

"He was just charming," said Cora promptly.

"Perfectly lovely," agreed Belle.

"Such soulful eyes!" exclaimed Bess languishingly.

"That I should ever have lived to hear this!" groaned Walter.

"I guess our cake is dough," said Paul.

"Eftsoon and gadzooks!" cried Jack, striking an attitude, "lead me to him, and sooth it shall go hard with me if my trusty sword drink not the caitiff's blood."

"I guess you don't need to go as far as that,"

laughed Cora. "Leave him alone and the police will take care of him."

"A-ha, a criminal!" cried Walter.

"That only makes him the more romantic," declared Paul.

"It doesn't help our case one bit," said Jack. "Haven't you heard of how women will deck a murderer's cell with flowers?"

"I don't think he'd have the nerve to be a murderer," remarked Belle. "His specialty is stealing purses."

And while the boys listened intently and threw in occasional indignant exclamations, the girls told of the young man's attempt to scrape acquaintance, and of how later he had almost succeeded in getting possession of Cora's purse.

"The cur!" growled Jack. "I wish I'd happened along when he was trying to get fresh!"

"You helped me out just the same, even if you weren't there," replied Cora. "You ought to have seen how he made tracks for his buggy when I said my brother would be along shortly."

"You see," said Jack, throwing out his chest, "how the terror of my name has preceded me."

"It's comforting anyway," chimed in Walter. "It proves that we men are good for something."

"And that the girls ought to have us with them all the time as trusty knights and vassals," added Paul.

"You're too ready to jump to conclusions," rebuked Cora. "But now we'd better be hurrying along. It's getting towards dark, and we'll have all we can do to get to Aunt Margaret's in time for dinner."

"Dinner!" exclaimed Jack. "Where have I heard that word before? Lead me to it!"

"Do you think you can keep up with us in that car?" asked Cora wickedly. "If not, I'll give you a tow."

"Listen to her rubbing it in!" moaned Paul.

"It wasn't enough to beat us," complained Walter.

"I guess that fellow was right," remarked Jack, "who said that Indians and women were alike. They both scalp the dead."

CHAPTER V

A GROUP OF VAGABONDS

THE two cars rolled along smartly, for the various happenings of the day had put the Motor Girls behind the schedule they had hoped to make. But despite their best efforts, dusk was settling down and the stars beginning to peep out when they drove up to the Kimball's Aunt Margaret's door.

She greeted them affectionately, and after they had washed off the dust of travel they were seated at the sumptuous meal she had had prepared in anticipation of their coming. After dinner was over, a number of young people in the neighborhood who had been invited to meet the tourists dropped in, and there was music and dancing. But Aunt Margaret's watchfulness over her charges prevented this from being prolonged to an unreasonable hour, and by eleven o'clock all the tired travelers were sleeping the dreamless sleep of vigorous, healthy youth.

They needed a good sleep, for the longest lap of their journey still lay before them. And it was at an early hour the next morning that, after a hearty breakfast and cordial thanks and good-byes to their gracious hostess, they climbed into their cars and drove off.

"Off at last for the Adirondacks!" cried Jack gaily, as he drew in great draughts of the fresh morning air.

"And for Camp Kill Kare!" added Paul.

The girls had started off a little ahead of them, but the boys soon drew alongside and Jack signaled for Cora to stop.

"I would have speech with thee, fair maiden," he remarked, as his sister obeyed.

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Cora in pretended vexation. "Here are those rude boys interrupting us just when we were having the loveliest talk."

"I guess you weren't talking about anything very important," replied Jack.

"No," said Bess, dimpling, "we were talking about you boys."

"And saying what a lovely thing it was to be all by ourselves for a little while," put in Belle.

"Girls," exhorted Walter solemnly, "remember that if there was an Ananias there was also a Sapphira."

"We're not so keen on having a stag party ourselves," explained Jack, "and we thought it would

be a dandy thing if one of you girls would come into our car and one of us fellows go to yours. That would make life one grand sweet song."

"It all comes from what Cora said yesterday about the refining influence of feminine society," said Walter. "I feel the need of that. In fact, I have a consuming desire to become refined. And I can't be, as long as I associate with these two low-brows. So you'd better let me ride in your car."

"And leave us in our native coarseness?" queried Paul. "Not on your life, old man! I need refinement just as much as you do."

"Peace, brethren," interposed Jack. "We'll do this thing on the level. My claims to coarseness are just as strong as either of yours, but do you see me engaging in unseemly brawls? Nay and again nay. We'll pull straws for it and may the coarsest man win."

"I don't know that we want any of you," said Cora. "We don't take incurable cases."

"Don't be too harsh, Cora," said Belle. "You know they say there's a spark of good in the very lowest."

"While the lamp holds out to burn
The vilest sinner may return,"

hummed Bess.

There were no straws at hand, but some matches served as well, and Walter proved to be the lucky one. Belle agreed to go to Jack's car, and Walter took her place alongside of Bess.

"Hurrah!" cried Walter, as he availed himself of his good fortune. "I'm saved. I'm doomed to refinement."

"Doomed?" laughed Cora.

"Did I say doomed?" Walter answered. "How careless of me! Of course I meant destined to refinement."

"I suppose you'll be eating lotus blossoms and water lilies before long," called out Jack, as the cars started up again.

"Watch me when lunch time comes," grinned Walter. "But I don't mind what you fellows say. I've got two refining influences while you have only one."

"You need all you can get," was Jack's parting shot.

With merry chaff and banter, the time flew by as though on wings. They had lunch at a quaint little inn by the roadside, and Walter proved that the charms of feminine society had not yet begun to affect his appetite. But then, as he explained, the cure would be all the more effective if it were gradual, and he had plenty of time yet to climb to higher planes.

In the early afternoon they were turning a bend

in the road, when Cora gave a sudden exclamation.

"Look!" she cried, pointing to a little glade at the right of the road. "There's a camp of some kind. I do believe it's gypsies!"

"Guessed it right the first time," declared Walter.

"That's what it is," agreed Bess. "Oh, Cora, don't you think we might stop a few minutes? I'd dearly love to have a look at them, if you think we can spare the time."

"I'm not so very keen about it myself," said Cora dubiously, for as those familiar with her previous adventures will remember, her experiences with these picturesque vagabonds had not been devoid of unpleasantness and danger. "But I'll see what Jack says about it, and if he thinks we have time, I won't mind stopping."

She hailed Jack, and, after consulting his watch, the latter agreed that they could easily spare a half-hour or so for a visit to the gypsy camp.

They drew their cars to the side of the road and picked their way through the woods to the little dell where the gypsy encampment lay.

It was a typical camp of those strange nomads in whose blood runs the "call of the wild," and who in their mode of life are almost as far removed from other human beings as though they lived upon another planet.

There were perhaps a dozen vans, from which

came strange smells of cooking, amid which onion and garlic predominated. Unkempt children in tattered clothing played with dogs that seemed to be legion, while wrinkled and slatternly women sat on the steps of the vans or made their way through the grounds, whining their requests to visitors to cross their palms with silver and learn in return all that pertained to their present and future. Swarthy men, some of them with huge ear-rings and with sashes and turbans that reminded one of the pirates of tradition, lay sprawled out on the grass watching the throng with eyes that were sometimes indifferent and again sullen and smoldering.

There were just two elements that redeemed the camp from its general aspect of squalor and forlornness. One was the fine horses that were scattered here and there, for the gypsy has the keenest eye for a good animal of any trader on earth. The other was the presence of several gypsy girls of a wild barbaric type of beauty, whose flashing eyes and gaudy trinkets contrasted with the prevailing ugliness of their surroundings.

There were a large number of visitors present, due to the proximity of a large town a mile or so away, through which the automobiles had passed just before reaching the camp.

"Here's the place to have your future told," said Jack.

"Lucky they can't tell our past," remarked Walter. "What a give-away that would be for some of us."

"I hope you haven't any deep dark secret that would 'chill the young blood, harrow up our souls' if it were told," laughed Cora.

"Walter just wants to make himself interesting," gibed Bess.

"Well, whatever I may have been, I'm all right now that you girls have undertaken to refine me," replied Walter.

"I'm realizing more and more what a tremendous contract it is," Cora came back at him. "But look at that girl over there? Isn't she a beauty?"

"She isn't hard to look at, for a fact," said Jack judicially, as his eyes fell on the gypsy girl his sister had indicated. "I think I'll get her to tell my fortune. I want to know whether I'm born to be hanged or drowned."

"It's safe to say that you're booked for a long life anyway," remarked Paul. "Only the good die young."

The girl had seen that the party were regarding her with interest, and she came over to them.

"Do you ladies want to have your fortunes told?" she asked with a winning smile that showed two rows of beautiful white teeth.

The girls hesitated.

"Go ahead, girls, and show the sporting spirit,"

urged Jack. "You can get the promise of a perfectly good husband for fifty cents. And that's cheap in these days of high prices."

"It's more than some of them are worth," laughed Belle.

"I hope that isn't a shot at us," said Paul. "I'd be a bargain at a dollar."

"She must have been thinking of that Higby fellow over at Roxbury," said Bess. "Why, what's the matter?" she asked, as the gypsy girl started violently and turned deadly pale.

Cora sprang to the girl's side and put her arm around her to steady her.

CHAPTER VI

A PERPLEXING PROBLEM

THE gypsy girl regained her self-control in a moment and gently put Cora's helping arm aside.

"It is nothing," she said. "I just had an attack of dizziness. The heat of the sun, perhaps."

It was evident that this last remark was only a pretext, for a pleasant breeze was blowing and they were standing under a great tree that shaded them completely.

"I hope it wasn't anything I said that startled you," said Bess curiously.

"How could it have been?" put in Belle incredulously. "You only referred jokingly to that Higby fellow who nearly got away with Cora's purse when we were shopping yesterday. I'm sure there's nothing in that to startle anybody."

Cora had been watching the girl intently, and at this second mention of the young man's name she saw a swift spasm—was it of pain or fright or a combination of both?—sweep over the girl's face.

"Well, never mind," said Cora briskly, "if you're sure you're all right now. Perhaps you'd better have a drink of water. Jack, suppose you go to the car and get one of the drinking cups."

Jack started promptly to obey, but the girl objected so strongly that he stopped and stood irresolute.

"No, no," she said, "please not. Only leetle deezy, but all right now," she continued, dropping into the slipshod gypsy manner of speaking. "Let me tell pretty ladies' fortunes."

But just then one of the gypsy men, who had been watching the group sharply, stepped up to the girl and spoke to her roughly in a jargon that the girls could not understand. It was evidently a command, for the gypsy girl turned instantly and went away, disappearing into one of the vans, while the man, after a scowl that included all the party, sauntered away and dropped on the grass beside some of his comrades.

"Well, what do you think of that?" demanded Belle in amazement.

"Just when she had a husband picked out for each of you, too," chaffed Paul. "But cheer up, girls. We're here yet. Count on us to the last breath. You can't lose us."

"No such luck," retorted Bess. "But what on earth made that man act that way?"

"It isn't like gypsies to let good money get

away from them," said Jack, "and they must have seen from our open countenances that we were easy marks and ready to cough up."

"Jack," said Walter severely, "please pass up that line of chatter—I mean, please refrain from such vulgar slang. In my unregenerate days I could have stood for it—I mean, endured it—but since I have become refined it hits me on the raw—I mean, it affects me painfully."

"Oh, stop your nonsense, you boys," chided Cora. "Can't you see I'm trying to think?"

"Cora's trying to think!" exclaimed her irrepressible brother. "Heaven be praised that I have lived to see this day!"

Cora gave him a scornful glance, and Jack sagged down at the knees, pretending to wilt.

"Just how did that girl strike you?" asked Cora thoughtfully.

"A peach," replied Jack promptly.

"A pippin—I mean, she was very good looking," added Walter.

"I'm asking the girls," said Cora witheringly.

"She didn't seem to me like a gypsy at all," answered Bess. "And yet I suppose of course she must be, since she's here with them."

"Did you notice the way she spoke when she was off her guard for a moment?" asked Belle. "She said that she had 'an attack of dizziness.' Later on, she was a 'leetle deezy.'"

"Her eyes were blue," remarked Cora mus-
ingly, "and that is something unusual in a gypsy."

"But her complexion was as dark as any of the
others," objected Bess.

"That might be accounted for by the tan from
the open-air life," replied Cora. "And then, too,
it would be easy to color it artificially."

"I didn't know girls ever did such things," in-
terrupted Jack with a pained expression.

"And then too," went on Cora, unheeding,
"when her sleeve fell back, I saw that her arm
was white. But what I'm trying to get at es-
pecially is whom she looks like. She resembles
some one that I've seen before, but I can't re-
member who it is."

"What do you suppose made her act so queerly
when I spoke of the stealing of your purse?"
asked Bess.

"It wasn't the robbery itself that startled her,"
said Cora. "It was the name of the man, Higby.
He was mentioned twice, and each time she looked
frightened."

"I wonder if she knows him," murmured Belle.

"He said there were lots of girls who would be
glad of his company," laughed Bess. "Perhaps
she is one of them."

"There was no liking in that look of hers,"
replied Cora emphatically. "It was positive
alarm."

"If a mere man may break into this discussion," said Jack humbly, "you fair detectives haven't yet told us why that pirate over there took the girl away from us."

"That's easy," interposed Walter. "He was jealous. It was my fatal gift of beauty that worried him. The girls all fall for it—I mean, are attracted by it."

"Girls," asked Cora exasperatedly, "why are those long legs of Walter's like organ grinders?"

"Why?" asked Belle.

"Give it up," said Bess.

"Because," explained Cora, "they always carry a monkey about with them."

Walter staggered back.

"Stung!" he moaned. "Penetrated, I mean."

"Well, don't suffer too much, poor boy," said Cora soothingly. "If it's any comfort to you to know it, your two accomplices in crime are just as bad. Women are the only sensible human beings anyway."

"Are they human?" asked Walter. "I've always thought of them as angels."

"Stop trying to square yourself," said Paul.

"Don't knuckle down to them," Jack adjured him.

"I must," replied Walter, "or they won't let me ride with them any more."

"We're not going to, anyway; that is, for the

rest of this afternoon," said Cora. "I want to have the girls in the car with me where we can talk over this thing without being interrupted."

"Shut out from Eden," groaned Walter bitterly. "You wash your hands of me. You cast me into outer darkness. Just when the better part of my nature was getting uppermost, you put me back into low company. I wouldn't have believed it of you, girls."

"Back to the kennel, you hound!" exclaimed Paul, seizing him by the collar. "You might have known that the girls would throw you down. They always do, sooner or later."

"Well, now that Lucifer as lightning has fallen from heaven," remarked Jack, "what do you say to hustling along? The afternoon waneth and my appetite waxeth. Dinner at Camp Kill Kare sounds awfully good to me."

"I suppose we'll have to," assented Cora reluctantly; "but I would like to have another glimpse of that gypsy girl first."

"Nothing doing," said Jack. "We're only visitors here anyway, and we haven't any right to intrude on their private affairs when they show us so clearly they don't want us to. Ten to one it's only a mare's nest anyway that you're stirring up, sis, about the girl. Probably she's an honest to goodness gypsy, just like the rest of them."

"That's what my common sense tells me,"

agreed Cora, "but something outside of common sense tells me that she isn't."

"That's the way I feel about it too," echoed Bess.

"I too," agreed Belle. "She may have been stolen when she was a child. That happens often enough."

"Not so often as it used to," said Paul. "The telegraph and the telephone make it too risky."

"Well, how about it?" said Jack. "Are you three Graces coming along, or do we three scapegraces have to wend our way to Camp Kill Kare alone?"

"There she is now!" exclaimed Bess, as she caught sight of the gypsy girl looking at them from the door of the van.

But a wrinkled crone who was sitting on the top step of the van reached out a skinny arm and angrily pushed the girl inside and out of sight.

"They've evidently made up their minds that we're showing too much interest in her, and for some reason they don't like it," sighed Cora. "Well, come along, girls. We'll have to go. But that gypsy girl has a history and a secret, and I'd give a good deal to find out just what they are."

CHAPTER VII

THE MOUNTAIN CAMP

THE Motor Girls, followed by the boys, made their way briskly back to the cars and climbed in, Walter resuming his place with the other boys and Belle going back to Cora and Bess.

For some time previous to running across the gypsy camp they had been rising higher and higher into the mountains, and now the road became still steeper. They had to run more slowly in consequence, for although both cars were good hill-climbers, it took a good deal of power to make any kind of speed. Besides, as they got farther into the wilderness, the road was rougher and more neglected. But it was just this wildness they had come to seek, and their spirits rose with the difficulties they encountered.

"You go in advance, Jack," said Cora, as the road grew narrower until it was difficult for the two cars to go side by side. "Of course, having the faster car, I suppose we ought to show the

way, but we're nothing if not magnanimous. If your car balks we'll push you along. Besides, you have the map."

"Don't worry about pushing us along," retorted Jack. "Just for that, I ought to shoot ahead out of sight and leave you to bitter regrets when you find yourselves lost in the wilderness. But I'm too noble to treat helpless girls that way, so you're safe for the present. But beware, woman, of goading me too far! It's a long worm that has no turning."

"If you're as mixed in your road directions as you are in your proverbs, I'm afraid we won't get to Camp Kill Kare to-night," rejoined Cora. "But go ahead now like a good boy, and think up some more bright things to spring on us. We want to be by ourselves so that we can talk without foolish interruptions."

"They want to talk," muttered Jack. "What a novelty!"

"If women talk a good deal, I notice that lots of men take after their mothers," replied Belle, as Jack's car darted into the lead.

"Isn't it tantalizing," said Cora to her chums, resuming their interrupted conversation, "that I can't think just whom that gypsy girl looks like? Don't you know how it is when you are trying to recall a word or a line of poetry or something, and have it just on the tip of your tongue but can't

quite get it? I feel just that way about this resemblance. I'm perfectly sure I've seen some one very much like her. Can't you girls help me out? We're together so much, and we know the same people. Put on your thinking caps and see if you can't give me a hint."

"I only wish I could," replied Belle thoughtfully. "There *was* something a little familiar about the girl, though it didn't strike me as strongly as it did you."

"There was a certain look in her eyes that suggested somebody I've seen," said Bess, "but for the life of me I can't remember who it was. But even suppose we did remember? It wouldn't prove anything. There are lots of people in the world who look alike and yet who haven't the slightest relation to each other."

"I know it," admitted Cora. "But just the same I have what the boys would call a hunch that in this case it would give us a clue to the gypsy girl's secret."

"If she has any," laughed Bess.

"Get out your crystal sphere, Sybilla, and pluck the heart from this mystery," smiled Belle.

"You girls can laugh if you want to," rejoined Cora, "but all the same I'll think about this and perhaps dream about it until I recall the face I'm groping for."

"I shouldn't wonder if we'd have something

more practical to think of before long," remarked Belle, pointing to the sky. "Do you see those clouds coming up there? I've been watching them for the last five minutes and they're getting bigger and blacker all the time. I'd hate to be caught in a thunderstorm."

"And get into Camp Kill Kare all wet and bedraggled," added Bess. "Oh, Cora, let's hurry!"

"It isn't getting wet that bothers me so much," replied Cora. "We could put up the top and keep dry enough. But a heavy storm would turn the road into a quagmire, and goodness knows it's bad enough as it is."

The boys ahead had seen the signs, and Jack shouted back:

"Give her all the juice she can stand, sis! If the storm only holds off for fifteen minutes we'll make the camp."

His own car shot ahead, and Cora threw in the speed and kept close behind. They could hear now faint rumblings of thunder, all the more noticeable because of the sudden hush that had fallen over the forest, as birds and animals and insects sensed the coming storm.

Darker and darker it grew and faster and faster the cars sped along, as their drivers called on the last ounce of speed they had in them. Despite their fluttering of anxiety, the girls had a keen sense of exhilaration in this race with the ele-

ments. Their veils whipped about their faces and their glowing eyes and reddened cheeks showed their inward excitement.

A jagged flash of lightning shot across the sky, followed by a deafening peal of thunder. It was evident that the bolt had struck not far off, for a moment later they heard the crash of a falling tree at a little distance to the right.

"Oh, hurry! hurry!" urged Bess and Belle

"Do you think I'm creeping?" Cora called back. "I can't talk to the car and encourage it as I might a horse. You'll notice that the boys aren't leaving us behind."

As a matter of fact, the cars were nearly touching.

"Keep up your pluck, girls!" Jack called back. "If this map is all right, we'll make the camp in five minutes more."

"If we didn't have an old tub in front of us, we'd make it in four," sang out Cora.

"If the rain will only hold off," murmured Belle.

But the prospect grew ever more threatening. The peals of thunder were redoubled and the lightning played so vividly across the sky that Bess covered her face with her hands.

"Suppose the car should be struck!" she exclaimed.

"If it were, we'd probably never know it," was all the comfort her sister could give.

Just then there was an appalling roar, and a great tree, split from top to bottom, swayed for a moment and then fell with a deafening crash right across the road, about a hundred feet in front of the leading car.

There were shrieks from the girls, and a jumble of shouts came from the boys, as Jack brought his machine to a halt, and Cora, who had not lost her presence of mind, did the same.

All jumped out and ran forward. A glance told them that there was no getting past the tree. It blocked the road completely. Nor was it possible to get around the fallen monarch with the cars, for there was dense undergrowth on both sides of the road.

"No help for it, girls," announced Jack, after a hurried examination of the conditions. "We'll have to run for it. I caught a glimpse of the bungalow a minute ago, and it's not far from here. We'll have to leave the cars here and come back and cut a path for them after the storm's over."

"But suppose they should be stolen?" objected Belle.

"Mighty little chance of that in this neck of the woods," replied Paul. "You notice we haven't met any one for the last two hours. We'll put up the tops so that the inside won't get wet. And there'll be some one at the bungalow that we can

send out to guard them and keep you from worrying about them."

"Now we've got to make tracks for the house. Come ahead, girls!" cried Jack, as soon as the tops had been put up.

Each of the boys took charge of one of the girls, and they skirted the tree, pushing their way through the underbrush till they reached the road on the other side.

The outdoor life of the Motor Girls had made them fleet and strong, and although of course with their clinging skirts they could not keep up with the boys, the latter accommodated their pace to theirs, and they came in sight of the bungalow in a few minutes.

But the rain was coming, too, and it was a pretty race. They could see it being driven before the wind in great gusts, and they felt the pattering of the advance drops. And just as they gained the shelter of the bungalow porch, the rain came down in torrents.

Their coming had been seen from the house, and Aunt Betty King came running out to meet them.

"You darlings!" she cried, as she tried to gather all the girls at once into her arms, and kissed them in turn. "How glad I am to see you! I've been watching for you for the last two hours and was beginning to worry for fear you wouldn't get

here before dark. And how lucky you were to get here ahead of the storm. But how on earth did you come?"

"We ran here all the way from Chelton," said Jack with a sober face. "How is that for Marathon work?"

"Don't pay any attention to that fibber," laughed Cora. "You know what Jack is. Our cars are standing a little way down the road. The lightning struck a tree and it fell so that it blocked the path. So we had to make the rest of the way on foot."

"You poor dears!" exclaimed Aunt Betty with ready sympathy. "But come right in now and get rested. You must be awfully tired after your long journey, and you're all out of breath from running so hard. And you boys, too. Your rooms are all ready for you and supper will be ready in a few minutes."

She led the way inside, followed by the flushed and panting travelers, glad that the end of their journey found them safely housed at Camp Kill Kare.

The bungalow was a strongly built and capacious one. It had only two stories, but was very wide and deep. It stood on a high point in the Adirondack Mountains, with a view that stretched for many miles in all directions. There was a large cleared space about the building, but one

had only to go a few rods away to find himself in a genuine wilderness.

The bungalow belonged to a relative of Mrs. Kimball. Usually the owner occupied it himself during the summer months; but this year he was on a trip to India, hunting for big game, and he had placed the camp at Mrs. Kimball's disposal, with a cordial invitation to occupy it and make use of all the facilities it afforded for enjoyment.

As Cora's mother could not accompany the young folks, the question of a suitable chaperon had given her some concern. But this had been solved by securing the consent of Aunt Betty to undertake that responsibility.

Mrs. King was not really Cora's aunt, being a second cousin of Mrs. Kimball. But everybody called her by the comfortable and affectionate title of Aunt Betty, and she was a great favorite in the Kimball home, which she frequently visited. She was a widow without children, and she welcomed the opportunity of mothering this lively brood of young people.

The main floor of the bungalow was divided into two parts by the long hall that ran from front to back. On the right was a large living room and library combined. Off from this was a music room, and the girls gave little cries of delight as they saw a handsome baby grand piano through the portières.

On the left of the hall was the dining room, which appealed more strongly to the boys than the music room, and back of this was the kitchen, from which savory odors were wafted to their olfactory organs.

Up the broad stairs Aunt Betty led the way, and pointed out to the various members of the party the rooms they were to occupy. Those of the girls were on the south side of the house, while the boys' quarters faced the north. Trunks had been sent on before and were in the rooms.

"What perfectly darling rooms!" cried Cora, as the delighted girls let their eyes roam over the two connecting rooms that had been assigned to them.

"That's all right!" shouted Jack from across the hall, "but don't forget that there's a perfectly darling little dining room downstairs, and I'm honing to make its acquaintance."

"Don't worry," flung back Belle. "We'll be ready to go down as soon as you are."

"Ha, ha!" cried Jack. "Listen to my low, mirthless laugh."

CHAPTER VIII

FUN IN THE OPEN

JACK's sardonic laugh seemed to be justified, for the boys had been below stairs for several minutes before the girls came trooping down.

"One more proof that I'm never mistaken," Jack remarked, as he shook his head sadly at the laughing bevy.

"You boys haven't so much to do as we girls have," said Belle, making a little face at him.

"We haven't, eh?" replied Walter. "I lost all my hair-pins in that mad sprint for the house."

"And the rain took my hair out of curl," added Paul.

"And I had the greatest hunt before I found my box of powder!" said Jack in a high falsetto.

Just then Mrs. King came in from the kitchen, where she had been supervising the preparations for dinner.

"Come right along now and take your places at the table," she beamed.

"Table is my middle name!" exclaimed Jack, as he led the way, followed by the others.

It was a sumptuous meal that Aunt Betty had prepared, and with their appetites sharpened by their long ride, the travelers did it full justice. And the warmth and good cheer of the cozy dining room were emphasized by contrast with the rain that beat upon the windows.

"A regular flood," commented Jack.

"Noah would have felt at home in that," said Bess.

"That reminds me," interposed Paul. "Noah was supposed to take two specimens of every kind of animal when he went into the Ark. But there was one species he overlooked."

"What was that?" asked Cora.

"Rats," replied Paul.

"How do you make that out?" inquired Belle.

"Why," Paul answered, "he had been sailing forty days before he saw any rat."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

"Ararat!" Cora at length exclaimed. "Paul, how could you inflict that on us?"

"You ought to be shot at sunrise," said Bess.

"Now you see, Aunt Betty, what we've had to stand on our journey up here," moaned Cora.

"I must say you seem to have thrived on it," smiled Aunt Betty, looking at the rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes of the girls.

"Good for Aunt Betty!" cried Walter. "She appreciates us! You girls will too, when you've seen a little more of men and realize how we stand out from the common herd."

"Who was that woman," asked Bess, turning to Cora, "who said that the more she saw of men the more fond she grew of dogs?"

"Poor, misguided female," said Paul pityingly. "I suppose she was an inmate of a lunatic asylum."

"More to be pitied than censured," added Jack.

By this time they had reached dessert, and when they had finished, Aunt Betty proposed an adjournment to the porch.

"It's perfectly dry and snug out here," she said, "and I think the rain will be over soon anyway. When it rains so hard up here it doesn't last very long. But you girls had better get some wraps, for even though it is August, the nights are rather cool, especially after a storm."

There was an abundance of big, comfortable chairs on the porch, and they grouped them into a semi-circle and sat laughing and talking, on the best of terms with themselves and the world.

"That was rather a narrow escape we had this afternoon," remarked Bess. "If we had been a hundred feet further on the road than we were, that tree would have come down plump on top of us."

"A miss is as good as a mile," returned Jack lightly.

"By the way, I suppose those poor old cars of ours are getting a thorough soaking," observed Cora. "What are you going to do about them, boys? It doesn't seem to me that we ought to let them stay there all night."

"I guess it's up to us fellows to take a turn down there and look them over," answered Jack. "The fact is that I've had such a good dinner that I feel too lazy to move. But far be it from me to resist the plain call of duty."

"What's the matter with us girls going along with you?" asked Bess.

Aunt Betty looked aghast.

"What, in all this mud and rain?" she protested.

"You forget that we Motor Girls are used to being out in all kinds of weather," laughed Cora. "But we'll promise to wrap up well if you let us go. It's lucky that our trunks were sent on up here ahead of us, so that we have our rubbers and raincoats all ready to get into. Besides, it's practically stopped raining now."

Aunt Betty was very easily won over.

"I'll send Joel, the stableman, along with a lantern," she said. "He knows the woods like a book by night or day. Then, too, he's as strong as an ox, and he can help to get the cars out of the fix."

"And we'll take a couple of axes along," said Jack. "I have an idea some tall chopping will have to be done before we get the cars where they belong."

The girls went up to get their raincoats and overshoes, while the boys got their hats and hunted up Joel.

He was a tall, gaunt backwoodsman, who in his earlier days had been a guide in the Adirondack region. But periodic attacks of rheumatism had made it difficult for him to continue his calling, and he had become the man of all work at Kill•Kare Camp. He knew the forest thoroughly and had an intimate acquaintance with the habits of every creature that had fur, fin or feather.

Despite his somewhat advanced years, he was still a powerful man, and his strength was equaled by his good-nature and reliability.

The boys liked him at once, and he on his part was very friendly and cordial.

"So you've got a couple o' them buzz wagons stalled there," he said. "Never rode in one in my life, but the pesky things suttinly have it all over a hoss when it comes to git up and git."

"You've got a treat waiting for you, then, Joel," laughed Jack. "Some day we'll take you riding, and you'll go so fast you'll have to hold on to your hair to keep it from being blown off."

"I ain't prezactly pinin' fur no sich speed as

that," said Joel. "I sh'd think them gals w'u'd be skeered to death to ride in one uv them."

"They drive them as well as ride in them," returned Jack. "My sister can handle one of them as well as any man can. You ought to have seen the race she gave me yesterday."

"Ye don't say so!" replied Joel, and it was evident that his respect for the feminine members of the party had gone up several degrees.

They were soon equipped with a lantern and three axes. In addition, Joel took along some sticks of resinous wood to serve as torches, and they came around to the front porch, where they found the girls impatiently waiting for them.

All started out in high spirits, Joel leading the way. The road was muddy, but they found fairly good footing on the turf that bordered it. The rain had now entirely ceased.

It was not long before they reached the fallen tree, and they found the cars standing where they had left them.

"Ye needn't hev bin much skeered," grinned Joel. "There ain't many folks come along this way, an' them that do is giner'lly honest. It's only when the gypsies come round that we hev to keep a tight grip on things, specially hosses. Them gypsies suttinly is light-fingered, an' they kin beat a weasel in gittin' into places where they ain't got no business to be."

"We saw a camp of them to-day," said Cora, in whom the word "gypsy" just now woke an instant response.

"Is thet so?" asked Joel in surprise. "Then they're probably headed up this way. I heven't seen 'em around these diggin's fur sev'ral years now, and I wuz hopin' I'd never see their ugly faces ag'in."

"I'd like to see Joel go to the mat with that pirate that took the girl away from us to-day," grinned Jack.

"It would be some scrap," agreed Walter, as he took in the brawn and bulk of the backwoodsman. "I'd bet on Joel unless the other fellow used a knife."

In order to see more clearly what they were doing, the torches were lighted and placed where they would do the most good. Then Joel surveyed the scene of action.

"There's jist one thing to do," he finally announced, "an' thet is to cut through this tree an' git it off uv the road. It might be a leetle bit easier to git the cars around through the brush, but the tree can't be let to stay there blockin' up the road, an' I might ez well git it out of the way fust ez last."

He took off his corduroy jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, showing the mighty biceps beneath.

"You're not going to do it all alone," protested Jack. "Let us help. There are two axes besides yours."

"Why," said Joel a little dubiously, "you boys ain't used to this kind uv work, an' I'm afraid it'll use ye up too much. It ain't only the strength, but there's a knack about usin' a woodsman's ax thet it takes time to git on to. Still, ye kin try it fur a while if ye want to."

Jack and Paul took off their coats, while the girls, who were perched like so many birds in Jack's car, clapped their hands in mock applause.

"Behold the gallant foresters," sang out Belle.

"Woodman, spare that tree,
Touch not a single bough!"

quoted Bess.

"To-day it threatened me,
I've no use for it now,"

improvised Cora.

"Listen to the trilling of the merry songsters," said Jack, with impressive sarcasm. "They toil not, neither do they spin. They mock and fleer at us sons of honest toil. They——"

"Get to work, Jack," Cora interrupted him heartlessly. "I love to see you work. It's so un-

usual. Joel will have the trunk cut through before you boys get started."

Thus adjured, Jack and Paul started in with a right good will, each attacking the trunk at a distance of about ten feet on either side of Joel.

Both boys were strong and sturdy, and they worked the more vigorously because they were under the appraising eyes of the girls. But their work was nothing compared with Joel's. Nowhere could there have been found a more striking illustration of the advantages of the professional over the amateur.

Joel's work was the very poetry of motion. Back and forth his flashing ax swung tirelessly, biting with resistless force into the very heart of the tree, and in a surprisingly short time he had cut the trunk entirely through.

Walter took his turn with the other boys and did valiant execution. But all were soon winded with their unusual exertions, and were forced to rest, while the perspiration poured down their faces in streams.

"This has got it all over a Turkish bath," muttered Jack.

"I'll bet I've lost five pounds in as many minutes," growled Paul.

"There's an idea for you, Bess," said her sister mischievously. "Talk about reducing. You'd be a sylph in half an hour."

"I'd be a corpse, you mean," responded Bess. "No, thank you. I'll take my reducing in homeopathic doses."

Joel at this point insisted on finishing the job. He had not turned a hair in his previous exertions, and he seemed as fresh as ever when the work was completely done.

"Now how are we going to get the logs off the road?" asked Jack.

"What's the matter with making the car do its share of the work?" asked Cora. "We'll fasten a rope to each one of the logs and with you men guiding them we can drag them to one side of the road."

The plan met with instant approval and in a very few minutes the road was clear.

"Good idea, sis," said Jack approvingly. "Now we'll bundle these tools into the cars and go to Camp Kill Kare in style."

CHAPTER IX

THE "WATER SPRITE"

THE next morning dawned clear and beautiful. The storm of the day before had washed the dust from plants and trees, and seemed to have washed the very air itself, for it was as clear as crystal and had a tonic quality that set the blood to dancing.

Cora had awakened early and stolen to her window, where she sat entranced by the beauty of the view. But she was not allowed to enjoy it long, for there came a thundering knock on the door that made her jump.

"Come along, you sleepyheads!" sounded Jack's voice from outside. "It's too fine a morning to waste it in sleep."

"Let us now be up and doing!" chanted Walter.

"The day is one to stir the sluggard blood!" added Paul.

"You boys just trot along," sang out Cora defiantly. "We're going to take our time."

"You always do," retorted Jack. "If time were money you girls would be millionaires."

"Let them rave," remarked Belle, as she opened her sleepy eyes.

"I'm going to have another forty winks," said Bess, as she turned over on her pillow.

"No, you're not!" declared Cora, as the boys went clattering down the stairs. "It's a perfectly gorgeous day, girls, and it's simply a crime to waste it in bed. The view from these windows is enough to make you gasp. Besides, we don't want to keep breakfast waiting."

Bess still protested, but yielded to the laughing threat of being dragged from bed if she did not get up of her own accord, and the girls hurried with their dressing.

They found the boys already at the table, making huge inroads on the food.

"You see we're waiting for you," remarked Jack, as he passed his plate for another helping of bacon and eggs.

"Yes," replied Cora, "I see you are."

"You're a gallant lot!" reproached Belle.

"We didn't think you'd get up till noon," defended Walter.

"Besides," added Paul, "we've heard of something that makes us want to hustle."

"What is that?" asked Bess with lively interest, as the girls took their seats.

"Aunt Betty tells us that there is an old motor boat down on the lake," replied Jack. "It hasn't been used much for the last two or three years, and it's probably a good deal out of repair. We thought we might be able to tinker it up and take you girls out for a sail on the lake."

"You see, we're always thinking of how we can give you girls a good time," observed Paul.

"Of course you weren't expecting to have a good time yourselves," mocked Cora.

"I didn't know that there was a lake so close at hand," said Belle delightedly.

"Hadn't I told you about it?" said Cora. "We've had so much to talk about that I must have omitted that from my description. But there is a beautiful mountain lake not more than five minutes' walk from here. I didn't know that there was a motor boat anywhere round, though. I'm wild to have a look at it."

"Don't spend too long a time at the table, then," admonished Jack.

"That's pretty good, coming from you," countered Belle. "But don't worry. You boys live to eat, while we eat to live."

"None of you seems to be wasting away," retorted Jack. "But hurry along now and all will be forgiven. We fellows have got to go out and see if Joel has the tools we'll need for tinkering up the boat."

They excused themselves and went out, while the girls, who were all agog with the new pleasure promised them, hurried through their meal and were ready for the trip when the boys returned.

A few minutes of brisk walking brought them to the borders of a lake whose blue waters shimmered in the morning sun. An exclamation of delight broke from them as they gazed upon its beauty.

The lake stretched for about four miles in one direction and was perhaps a mile and a half in width. Near the center of it they could see a small island that appeared to be heavily wooded.

Not far from where they were standing was a small boathouse with a pier projecting into the lake. Near the end of the little dock a motor boat was moored.

"There's the boat!" cried Jack, and they all made a rush for it.

"The *Water Sprite*," read Cora from the partly effaced letters on the stern.

"It has good enough lines," said Walter, as he ran his eyes over the boat, "but it seems as though it had been pretty well neglected."

"The owner never used it much," explained Jack. "He didn't care much for the water, and when he was here spent most of his time in hunting on land."

"Looks pretty much like junk to me," admitted Paul, as he took in the dilapidated appearance of the boat.

The others could not help agreeing that Paul's criticism seemed justified.

"Doesn't look as though she'd be worth taking much trouble for, does she?" remarked Jack doubtfully.

"Well, you wouldn't say that she'd just come from a motor-boat show," observed Paul; "but just the same she may be a well made boat and capable of speed too if she's put in decent condition. Of course she looks like a total loss now, but it's wonderful what a little work will do. Let's take a look at the engine anyway."

They boarded the little craft and removed a tarpaulin that had been spread over the engine. The boys then proceeded to give the latter a thorough inspection, first, however, bailing out the water that had collected in the bottom of the boat.

"Say, fellows!" exclaimed Jack, as his eyes lit on the manufacturer's name plate, "this is a good little motor, no doubt of that. You know that any engine these people put out is bound to be first class, don't you?"

"That's true enough," agreed Paul, "but the best engine ever built can be ruined by carelessness and neglect."

"Yes," assented Walter, "but there may not be so much the matter with this chugger after all. First thing to do is to turn the old engine over and see how it sounds." He had already put in some oil and gasoline.

"A fine idea," panted Jack after applying all his strength to the flywheel without result. "The trouble is that it won't turn at all."

"Here," said Walter, taking it from his hand, "let me try. Only you mustn't mind if I pull the whole engine out of the boat. I'm mighty apt to if I really let myself go, you know."

"Listen to Samson talking!" gibed Cora.

"Go ahead," said Jack. "Look out for flying splinters, Paul. Sampson is going to tear things wide open."

"He's mighty strong," mocked Paul. "He doesn't ask you to prove it. He admits it."

There were no flying splinters, however, for in spite of all Walter's exertions, the engine remained immovable.

"Well, that proves that she's a good solid boat to stand the strain," grinned Walter, at last giving over the attempt.

"The muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands,"

jeered Cora.

"Guess there's nothing to do," continued Walter, "but take the engine down and see what's wrong. It feels as though the parts had grown together."

"Must be if you couldn't move it," said Jack scathingly. "But let's get busy, fellows. I suppose the first thing to do is to get the cylinders off."

They fell to with a will, and soon had the smaller fittings dismounted. The motor was of the two-cylinder, two-cycle type, and according to the makers' plate was rated at six horse power. The exterior was in fairly good condition, only a few patches of rust showing here and there where the paint had been chipped off, leaving the metal exposed.

With some difficulty, the boys got the cylinders off. As they removed the front one, Jack gave a long whistle.

"I'll bet there's the cause of the trouble," he said, pointing to the front cylinder.

The others examined it and Paul remarked:

"Guess it's a case of broken piston ring, eh, Jack?"

"No doubt of it," was the response.

And indeed this would have been plain even to the most inexperienced eye. One of the grooves cut in the piston to receive a compression ring was packed with broken bits of metal and metal-

lic dust, many of the fragments having actually been reduced to powder.

"That's a bad job," remarked Walter, shaking his head. "I wonder if the cylinder itself is damaged much."

"Easy to find out," said Jack. "Let's have a look."

They were relieved to find that the cylinder was very little scored, considering the condition of the piston.

"Looks to me as if a new set of piston rings would be necessary," judged Paul.

"That's what," replied Jack. "But it would probably take a week to get them from the manufacturers."

Cora gave a little exclamation of dismay.

"And wait all that time before we can have a ride in the *Water Sprite*?" she asked.

"Unless you can wave a magic wand and make the pistons come running," said Jack.

"I'm going to rummage through these lockers," declared Cora, jumping up and going into the little cabin. "Perhaps there are some spare parts on hand."

A moment later she gave an exclamation of triumph.

"Here they are!" she cried, holding up a pair of the much desired rings.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" exclaimed Bess.

"Takes a woman to do things," said Belle in a superior way.

The boys looked a little sheepish, but at the same time delighted.

"She's a fairy all right," conceded Walter.

"You're the real thing, sis," beamed Jack, as he held out his hand for the rings. "And now for the dirty work."

They adjusted the rings and overhauled the rest of the engine, which proved to be in fairly good condition. There were no radical defects, and by dint of hard work they soon had the entire machinery in what seemed to be good working order.

"There," panted Jack, as he straightened up, "I guess we're some little machinists, all right."

"We ought to be able to get a union card," said Walter.

"Toil has no terror for us!" declared Paul, striking an attitude.

"Those boys just hate themselves, don't they?" laughed Bess.

"They've worked pretty hard—for them," admitted Cora. "And as a special reward, boys," she added generously, "we'll let you take us for our first ride in the *Water Sprite* this afternoon."

CHAPTER X

SPRINGING A LEAK

"YOU do us too much honor," said Paul, making a low bow in his best Chesterfieldian manner.

"I know that perfectly well," replied Cora; "but I happen to feel in a condescending mood."

"Good gracious, girls!" exclaimed Belle, consulting her watch, "do you know that it's nearly twelve o'clock? We've been working here all the morning."

"*We've* been working!" repeated Jack with marked emphasis. "I can see that you're all out of breath."

"Those also serve who only stand and wait,"

"That's the kind of job I'd like," said Walter, wiping the perspiration from his face.

"No chance," opined Paul. "The girls have got in ahead of us."

"Well, I notice you wouldn't have been very far ahead if Cora hadn't found those rings," retorted Bess.

"You boys are well enough where only muscle is concerned," said Belle patronizingly, "but when it comes to a matter of brains you're not in the same class with us."

They hurried back to the house, where they found a substantial meal ready for them. Then the girls put on their boating togs, and they started out to try the sailing qualities of the rejuvenated *Water Sprite*.

The boys cast off the moorings, and Cora, who could run a boat as well as any one, took her place at the wheel. Jack stayed near the engine, where he could keep an eye on its workings, and the rest disposed themselves wherever they could be most comfortable.

There was hardly any wind blowing and the water was scarcely stirred by a ripple. It was an ideal day for boating and they were prepared to enjoy it to the full.

The boat darted away from the dock as though it shared the jubilant spirits of the party, and Jack observed with great satisfaction that the engine was chugging away without missing a beat.

"She's working like a dream," he announced.

"And look at the way she minds the wheel," said Cora. "She yields to the slightest touch. It's no trouble at all to handle her."

"That's where she differs from most members of the fair sex," hazarded Walter.

"And see how fast she's going," said Bess, ignoring the gibe. "We're half a mile from shore already."

"Let's hug the shore and go all the way around the lake. We may be able to pick out some splendid spots to go picnicking in."

"And on the way back let's land on the island," suggested Bess. "I wonder if anybody lives there."

"Joel told me that there was a man who had a cabin over there and comes up here almost every summer," replied Jack. "He lives all alone, and spends his time in collecting plants and flowers. Joel can't understand that. Thinks he's a bug. I suppose he's a botanist or something of the kind."

"Well, he ought to have plenty of chances on that island," remarked Cora as her eye took in the luxuriant verdure of the place.

"Perhaps he wouldn't care to have us break in upon him," observed Belle. "He may be of the crank or hermit type."

"Or a woman-hater," laughed Bess.

"If he is, you'll cure him," declared Walter gallantly.

"I guess he won't object," said Paul. "Anyway, he doesn't own the island. He just camps out on it, and we have as much right there as he has."

They had quickly reached the further end of

the lake, and kept up a running fire of delighted exclamations at the beauties that nature had flung about this favored place with reckless prodigality.

"If a painter could only put it on canvas," sighed Cora.

"He never could!" exclaimed Belle. "The best he could do would be a poor imitation."

Suddenly Bess drew up her foot.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "my foot is soaking wet!"

Jack looked at the bottom of the boat.

"It's a little water that's seeped in," he remarked. "We'll get the bailer from the cabin locker and throw it out."

Walter bestirred himself and got the bailer. But after he had used it for a minute, a puzzled look came into his face.

"It's coming in faster than I can get it out," he said.

Belle uttered a little cry, and Bess became a trifle pale.

The other boys crowded around Walter.

"It is coming in pretty fast for a fact," muttered Paul.

"We'll all have to get at it," said Jack soberly.

There was only one bailer in the boat, and there was nothing else in the shape of a can or pail.

"Take off your sweaters," said Jack to the boys. "Soak up the water and wring them out over the side of the boat. Lively now!"

A moment more and the boys were working like beavers.

"It must have been the straining of the engine," explained Jack. "It's started a board in the old tub. Work like the mischief, boys!"

Bess and Belle were huddled together in alarm, but they said nothing to betray the panic that was growing upon them.

Cora's lips were pressed a little more tightly together and her cheeks were a trifle pale. But her eyes were glowing like stars, and were full of courage and determination.

She gave the wheel a turn and headed straight for the island, which was the nearest land.

The water continued to gain, and as the boat settled a trifle in consequence of the added weight, its progress was necessarily slower.

The boys were working frantically. Bess and Belle would have gladly helped, but in the narrow limits of the boat they would only have been in the way.

The open space in the bottom of the boat was yawning now. Jack doubled up his sweater and thrust it into the opening, while the others continued to bail.

Still the water gained, and the boat was perceptibly settling. But they were near the island now, and Cora turned the bow toward a low, shelving part.

A moment more and, with a sensation of infinite relief, they felt the bow slide into the mud of the bottom. Jack leaped to the engine and stopped its chugging. Then all took a long breath and looked at each other.

The faces of the boys were white and in the eyes of the girls there was more than a suspicion of anxiety.

"Land ho!" exclaimed Jack, giving his sister a hug.

"Castaways!" cried Paul dramatically.

"But not on a desert island, thank heaven!" said Bess.

"But how are we to get on shore without getting wet?" queried Belle, a lesser anxiety seizing her, now that the greater one was dispelled.

"Can you ask that," said Walter reproachfully, "when there are three husky sailors here who ask nothing better than to carry you to the shore?"

"It's only a foot deep near the bow," declared Jack. "Over we go, boys," and he set the example, that was instantly followed by his comrades.

Each took one of the girls and landed her safely on the shore. With the exception of Bess' wet feet, the girls were almost as fresh and unruffled as ever, but the boys with their dripping trousers clinging closely round them presented a comical picture.

"That's right, laugh at us!" said Walter, as the girls looked at them with mirth in their eyes. "Here we risk our lives for you and that's all the reward we get. Suppose a shark had bitten us when we were wading to the shore with our cargo of beauty. Suppose——"

But his diatribe was interrupted by the appearance of a man who stepped from the trees that came down near to the water's edge.

He looked at the party with a whimsical smile.

"Why, it's Mr. Morley!"

"So it is," echoed Bess and Belle.

"The very same," smiled the newcomer. "And you are the young ladies that came to my help the other day when I ran my car into a tree. Who would have supposed that we would meet again so soon and under such different circumstances?"

He shook hands heartily with the girls, and then was introduced to the boys.

"You've had something like a shipwreck, I see," he said, as he looked at the boat.

"Nothing very serious," replied Jack. "Although it might have been, if we'd had much farther to go to reach shore."

"It's too bad," returned Mr. Morley. "However, I'm very glad it wasn't worse. But come up to my cabin. It's only a little way from here. You can build a fire outside and stand about it until your clothes are dry. I live rather simply

here, but I can offer you some refreshments. After that, we'll see what we can do toward patching up your boat."

He led the way, chatting with Cora, and the rest followed. A few minutes' walk brought them to the cabin. It was a small, one-story structure, with three rooms. One served as a living room, dining room and kitchen combined, while the others consisted of a sleeping room and a room where Mr. Morley kept his specimens.

" 'A poor place, but mine own,' " quoted their host, with a smile. "I spend most of my summers here looking for specimens. The rest of the year I teach botany in a college. Now I'm going to bring out some cakes and tea and put the young ladies in charge, and we'll have a regular afternoon tea."

While the girls fluttered about inside, preparing the refreshments, Mr. Morley and the boys built a fire a little way from the door, and in a little while the youths were dry and comfortable again.

It was a gay party that a little later sat around the table where the girls had spread the refreshments. Mr. Morley seemed genuinely glad to have them with him, and the boys and girls were in the highest spirits. What might have been a disaster had developed into a lark.

While the girls were clearing up the things later, their host went down with the boys to the boat.

He had brought along some boards and oakum, together with necessary tools. His own rowboat enabled them to board the *Water Sprite* without getting another wetting. Once there, the boys took off their shoes, rolled their trousers to the knees and set to work. In less than an hour they had repaired the damage. Then they bailed out the water and watched anxiously to see if any more came in.

But their anxiety was needless. The work had been well done, and the boat floated high and dry on the water.

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CHAPTER XI

CORA MAKES A DISCOVERY

THE boys, followed by Mr. Morley, retraced their steps to the cabin and told the good news.

"And now," said Cora, "I suppose we must go. It was awfully good of you, Mr. Morley, to take us shipwrecked travelers in and treat us so nicely."

The others echoed this sentiment, but Mr. Morley put in a vehement disclaimer.

"It's nothing compared to what you did for me the other day," he declared. "And I can't tell you how much good it has done me to have you young people here. It's a long time since I've had youth in my home. But that's my own fault. I drove it——"

He brought himself up with a sharp turn.

"Perhaps you'd like to take a look at my specimens before you go," he remarked tentatively.

"We'd dearly love to," replied Cora.

Mr. Morley led the way into the specimen room.

"Just now I'm making a collection of vampires," he remarked.

"No accounting for tastes," whispered Walter to Paul, in a voice too low to be heard by their host.

"Do you keep them in a cage?" asked Jack.

Mr. Morley looked up in surprise.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why," replied Jack, "you spoke of vampires, and I thought you meant vampire bats. They're the only kind of vampires I know anything about."

"I was referring to the plant this leaf was taken from," smiled their host, as he held it up for them to see.

It was a long, rounded leaf that seemed to be covered with tiny hairs, on which glistened something that resembled honey and gave forth a fragrant odor. On looking more closely they saw what appeared to be fragments of small insects.

"We call it the sun-dew," explained Mr. Morley. "It's common enough, and you've seen it in the fields many a time. But instead of living on elements drawn from the soil, it feeds on flies and other insects. They are attracted by the honey that it spreads out temptingly to bring them within its reach. But as soon as they light on it, the leaf tightens around them and crushes them to death. Then it eats them at leisure. That's why it's called a 'vampire.'"

"But," objected Cora, "any one would think from that that the plant had intelligence and knew just what it was doing, just as an animal does when it hunts for prey."

"Exactly," agreed Mr. Morley. "Who are we to say that plants don't have intelligence? What proof is there in nature that they don't suffer and enjoy, feel and plan, as men and animals do, only on a lower plane? We humans are too conceited. We assume that we possess intelligence almost exclusively. We grant some to animals, though we slur even that by calling it only instinct. But we've been inclined to deny it altogether to plants."

"Now I don't agree with this at all. And there are lots more of the newer school of naturalists who feel just as I do about it. Wherever there is life there is intelligence. Plants can be cunning and patient and cruel and deceitful. If they can't get enough of one kind of food, they hunt for another. When men and animals do these things or show these qualities, we admit that it is the result of thought. What is it, then, that makes a plant do precisely similar things with similar ends in view?"

"But there," he interrupted himself with a smile, "one might almost think that I was in my lecture room, talking to a class! It's a hobby of mine, and I forget sometimes that others may not be so interested in it as I am."

"But we *are* interested, keenly interested," protested Cora.

"I never thought of plants in that way before," declared Bess.

"It's opened up an entirely new way of looking at things," said Paul.

"Are there many kinds of vampire plants?" asked Belle.

"Lots of them," replied Mr. Morley. "And they use all kinds of devices—hooks, claws, poison, honey, snares and shocks."

"Desperate characters," whispered Walter to Jack.

"Worse than gunmen," murmured Jack.

"There, for instance," continued their host, "is the 'devil's snare' that is found in South America. It has long, snaky tentacles that sweep the ground for many yards in every direction, for all the world like the long suckers of the devil-fish. It gobbles up anything that comes within its reach, insects, mice and larger animals. Once it gets its deadly grip on a victim, it keeps on tightening and tightening until it chokes the life out of it. It has been known to grasp and kill a good-sized dog."

"The horrid thing!" exclaimed Bess with a little shudder.

"The S. P. C. A. ought to get after it," laughed Walter.

"There are plants, too," continued their mentor,

"that show intelligence by the way they adapt themselves to changed conditions. The bladderwort, for example, used to live on insects. Perhaps it got a hint somewhere that it could do better on water than on land. At any rate, it became a water plant. It lies just under the surface and imitates the wide-open mouth of a mother fish. The little minnows swim into it to avoid their enemies and as soon as they're well inside, the mouth closes and the plant regales itself with a fish dinner.

"Then there are the cannibal plants. There are hundreds of trees that have the life juices sucked from them by the parasitic plants that twine around them until they give up the ghost."

"Just as the trusts do to the common people," observed Jack.

"Well," said Cora, drawing a long breath, "I've always known that nature was cruel, but I've never connected that idea with plants."

"Cruel everywhere," assented Mr. Morley, "from man, creation's crown, to plants, creation's base."

They looked with a new interest and a heightened respect at the other specimens he showed, and the time passed so quickly that they were startled, on glancing out of doors, to see how rapidly dusk was coming on.

"When I get to mooning along on my pet theo-

ries, I never know when to stop," said Mr. Morley apologetically.

"It's been a real treat to listen to you, Mr. Morley," said Cora with her winning smile.

"Truth is not only stranger but more interesting than fiction," smiled Belle.

They separated with cordial good wishes and a hearty invitation to Mr. Morley to visit them at Camp Kill Kare. He stood at the cabin door, watching them as they hurried down to their boat.

"This is the end of a perfect day," sang Bess gaily, as they stepped on board the *Water Sprite*, which the boys had brought around to the little dock at which Mr. Morley's rowboat was tied.

"It certainly has been a crowded one," said Belle.

"Isn't Mr. Morley an unusual man?" asked Cora. "I'm more and more convinced that there's a mystery about him."

"He's a fine chap," said Jack, "but I didn't notice anything especially mysterious about him."

"That's because you're a man," said Cora.

"I can't help belonging to that despised sex, can I?" inquired Jack in an injured tone.

"I suppose it's your misfortune rather than your fault," dimpled Bess.

"What do you suppose he meant when he said 'I drove it,' and then stopped so suddenly?" asked Belle thoughtfully.

"Probably thinking of his car when he drove it into a tree," remarked Jack flippantly.

If he had not been hardened, he would have succumbed before the exasperated glare of three pairs of girlish eyes.

"Better get in out of the wet, Jack," counseled Paul.

"Come over here and I'll protect you with my life," adjured Walter.

"Don't pay any attention to those idiots, girls," advised Cora. "We'll wait until we get by ourselves and can talk sense without being interrupted."

The *Water Sprite*, as though repenting of its lapses that afternoon, was now on its good behavior, and she kept "dry as a bone" on the short passage from the island.

They found Mrs. King a little worried at their late coming, and she threw up her hands at the story of their narrow escape from sinking.

"You've had a lively brood wished on you, Aunt Betty," laughed Cora, as she threw her arm affectionately around her aunt's waist.

"I can see that already," was the reply. "My only comfort is that you girls seem to bear a charmed life."

"Call it 'charming,'" said Walter gallantly, "and we boys will agree with you."

They had some music after dinner, but as all

were tired from their strenuous day they went to their rooms early.

"Girls," exclaimed Cora, as soon as they were alone, "I've found out whom that gypsy girl resembles! It's Mr. Morley!"

CHAPTER XII

AN UGLY CUSTOMER

"MR. MORLEY!" exclaimed Bess and Belle in a breath.

"Isn't it so?" demanded Cora. "I was struck by it when we first saw him just after we got off the boat."

"When I come to think of it, I believe you're right," replied Belle slowly.

"He has a way of holding his head like hers," agreed Bess.

"But it's the eyes," went on Cora. "They're blue like hers, and there are times when they have exactly the same expression. Girls, I believe we're on the edge of a mystery!"

"Don't talk so loud," cautioned Belle, "or the boys may catch something of what you're saying and they'll tease us to death about it."

"But, after all, what does it all amount to?" asked Bess. "It doesn't prove that they have the slightest connection with each other."

"And even if they have, what could we do about it?" asked Belle. "It's like the dog running after the train. What would he do with it if he caught it?"

The girls laughed.

"It is a tangle," admitted Cora. "We couldn't go to Mr. Morley and tell him that we'd seen a gypsy girl who reminded us of him."

"He mightn't take it as a compliment," suggested Bess.

"Or he might think we'd gone crazy," said Belle.

"There are probably ten million people in the world that the gypsy girl looks like in one way or another," said Bess, with difficulty suppressing a yawn. "Let's go to bed and forget all about it."

But Cora, as she slipped between the sheets, was far from intending to dismiss the subject in such cavalier fashion.

At breakfast the next morning, Paul proposed that they should visit an old logging camp that Joel had told him was located a few miles away.

"Of course it isn't in operation now," he said. "You'd have to visit it in winter to see it running full blast. But it will be interesting to see the bunk-houses and the flumes, and get an idea of the way the work is carried on."

"We won't have to do much walking," said Jack. "Joel says that the road between here and

there is a pretty good one for the cars. We can take our lunch along and make an all-day picnic of it."

The girls fell into the plan with enthusiasm, and in a short time the cars were brought to the front of the house, and they were ready to start.

Joel stood by, looking on with lively curiosity, as Cora took the wheel.

"How about a little spin for a mile or two?" laughed Cora.

Joel grinned a little sheepishly.

"Come along," urged Cora, "and I'll show you what fast going is really like."

"Better make your will, Joel," laughed Jack. "That sister of mine is some speed demon."

"I'm afraid it will put ye out in yer plans," objected Joel, though it was plain he was tempted.

"Not a bit of it," returned Cora cheerily. "We have all day before us. The rest will stay here, while you and I go down the road for a mile or two and back."

Joel looked at Mrs. King, and as she smiled her approval, he climbed clumsily into the car and sat in the back seat. Cora threw in the clutch, and the car started off.

"Hold on to your hair, Joel," Jack shouted after him.

The road was fairly good right there, and Cora increased the speed until the car was going well.

Joel gasped and held on tight to the sides of the car. He had never traveled on anything faster than the little narrow-gauge railroad train that wheezed along at about ten or fifteen miles an hour. Now he was moving at the rate of forty or more.

After about two miles had been covered, Cora eased up and prepared to turn the car.

"How about it, Joel?" she asked mischievously, as she straightened out for home.

"It's—it's scrumptious, miss!" gasped Joel, "but ain't ye feared ye'll wreck yer car? Doesn't seem's if anything on four wheels c'u'd stand it."

"Don't worry about that," replied Cora, and again Joel was treated to a burst of speed that set his heart thumping violently against his ribs.

It was with a sigh of relief that he climbed down from the car when it had come to a full stop.

"Sufferin' cats!" exclaimed the old backwoodsman, as he faced his grinning audience, "I've faced b'ars an' painters an' catamounts, but I wuz never so plumb skeered in all my life!

"An' to think uv a gal havin' the spunk to drive like that!" he muttered to himself, as he made his way back to the barn. "She suttinly is some gal!"

"A little rich for Joel's blood, I guess," laughed Jack, as the gay party started off.

"He'll grow to like it, though," prophesied

Cora. "He'll be ready for another one by the time we get back."

The cars moved along now at a moderate pace, for they had ample time before them and were not at all anxious to reach their destination.

Suddenly Jack's car, which was in advance, came to a full stop. He turned about and motioned for Cora to drive up as softly as possible.

"What is it?" she asked as she drew up alongside.

For answer, Jack pointed ahead, and the girls saw a big rattlesnake sunning himself in the road.

The girls gave a shriek that roused the snake. He reared his ugly triangular head, saw the cars, and with an angry rattle threw himself into position for attack or defense as the case might call for. His forked tongue played back and forth like lightning and his wicked eyes sparkled with rage.

"Beauty, isn't he?" asked Jack.

"Oh, let's get back!" cried Belle. "He may try to climb into the car!"

"A black snake does that sometimes, but a rattler never does," declared Walter. "He'll leave us alone if we leave him alone."

"For goodness' sake, leave him alone, then!" pleaded Bess.

"I'm going to get a closer look at him," said Jack, preparing to jump from the car.

"Don't, Jack, don't!" cried Cora, and there was such fear in his sister's voice that Jack yielded, though reluctantly.

"We're not going to let him get away, are we?" he grumbled.

"Why not?" replied Cora. "He wasn't doing anything to us."

"He ought to be killed on general principles," said Paul.

"He's an enemy of the human race," added Walter.

But this viewpoint did not appeal to the girls.

"He has a right to his life," said tender-hearted Bess.

"To be sure he has," acquiesced Belle. "Besides, you boys haven't any weapons, and you might get bitten."

"There are plenty of rocks and sticks around here to kill him with," said Walter.

But the girls insisted, and while they were excitedly talking, the snake himself, seeing that he was not attacked, solved the matter by uncoiling and gliding away into the bushes at the side of the road.

"A perfectly good bunch of rattles gone to waste," said Jack disgustedly, as they prepared to start on again.

"He's given us a tip anyway to be on the lookout," warned Walter. "Where there's one there

may be others. Joel says they're not very plentiful about here, but he does run across them sometimes. I wonder what Joel would say if he knew we had a chance to kill one and didn't do it."

"It doesn't matter what Joel thinks," said Bess. "I'm glad we let him go."

"You can't help handing it to the old boy for pluck," said Jack, with grudging admiration. "He was ready to fight the whole six of us."

"If it had been a regiment, it would have been just the same," remarked Paul.

"He kept that old buzzer of his working overtime," laughed Walter. "No striking on the sly for him. He keeps telling you just what he hopes to do to you."

"It's the first time I've met a rattler under such circumstances, and I hope it will be the last," said Bess.

"I guess his snakeship feels the same way about us, so honors are even," laughed Paul.

The party kept a sharp lookout from that time on, but no other snakes were encountered, and a few minutes later the logging camp came into view.

CHAPTER XIII

A MOMENTOUS STEP

THE camp, which consisted of a sawmill, an immense bunk-house capable of accommodating more than a hundred men, and a number of scattered outbuildings, was picturesquely located in a depression between two great hills. A mountain stream that came tearing down the side of one of the hills furnished power for the mill. Later on, some of its waters would be diverted to the giant flumes, down which the logs would come hurtling to the valley below.

Just now it was by no means the scene of busy life that it would become in the late fall and throughout the winter. Then would come the bearded lumberjacks, hardy, red-faced giants of the woods, Swedes, Norwegians, Irishmen, Frenchmen, hard workers, hard fighters, hard drinkers, and the wood would ring with the clang of axes and the crash of falling trees.

At present there was little work going on. The

sawmill, with a small force of men, was running in a languid sort of way, clearing up some of the by-products of the season before. The camp might be said to be in a state of suspended animation.

A sort of deputy foreman who was in charge gave the party a cordial greeting and showed them about the various points of interest, explaining volubly the processes through which the lumber passed from the standing tree to the shaped and finished product of the mills.

"We've got only a small force working in the woods just now," he explained. "They're nicking the trees, so that the men will know which ones are to be cut down this coming fall and winter."

"Sort of passing sentence of death, as it were," said Jack.

"I suppose you might call it that," smiled the foreman.

"It seems a pity that they should have to die," said Cora, as her eyes took in the stately trees that decked the mountain side.

"Especially after what Mr. Morley was saying yesterday about the trees being alive," remarked Bess.

"You girls are the limit," laughed Paul. "First you let the snake go, and now you want to save the trees."

"They'll be afraid to pick a nosegay after a

while for fear that the flowers will bleed," mocked Jack.

"I wish my folks had believed in that plant theory when I was a kid," drawled Walter. "Then I wouldn't have had to weed the garden for fear of hurting the weeds."

"There's not a bit of poetry in you boys," said Belle reproachfully.

"You're mistaken there," denied Paul. "We love beautiful things. If we didn't we wouldn't be chasing after you girls."

There was only one other visitor to the camp, a sharp-eyed reticent man, who loitered about without betraying interest in anything especially. He made no attempt to join the party, but kept by himself.

"Who is our unsociable friend over there?" inquired Jack.

"I don't know," replied the foreman. "He's been hanging around off and on for several days. He doesn't talk much to the men, but he and I have chinned a little together. About all I know of him is that his name is Baxter. He doesn't let on about his business."

"Maybe he's an author in search of local color," hazarded Bess.

"More likely a detective," remarked Jack. "You'd better look out, girls. He's closing in upon you, knowing you are desperate criminals."

After the foreman had left them, they climbed the slopes of the hill, and enjoyed the magnificent view from the summit. Then, as it was nearing noon, Jack suggested lunch.

"I'm keen to see what Aunt Betty has had put up for us," he remarked, "and what I'll do to it will be a sin and a shame."

"Let's go out into the woods to eat it," suggested Cora.

"Isn't this woods enough for you?" asked Paul, as he looked around.

"Not while we're in sight of the mill," returned Cora. "I want to go right out into the wild wilderness."

"Mightn't we get lost?" inquired Belle rather doubtfully.

"It's easier to get into the wilderness sometimes than it is to get out of it," added Bess.

"I guess it's safe enough," remarked Jack. "We won't go very far, and I have a compass with me, anyway."

There was no further protest. The boys went back to the cars and got the lunch basket. Then they rejoined the girls, and the party plunged gaily into the woods.

"We don't know where we're going, but we're on the way," chanted Walter.

There was a trail that had evidently been used by the lumberjacks, and the walking was easy.

So easy, in fact, and the balsam in the air was so stimulating and delightful, that the party had gone a good deal farther than they had first intended to before they came to a halt in a mossy glade that seemed to be especially designed by nature for a picnic party.

A little brook ran near by, and the boys brought drinking water from this, while the girls brought out the napkins and spread on them the host of good things that Aunt Betty had had put up for them.

There were no dyspeptics in the party, and the food vanished in amazing fashion, to the accompaniment of a running fire of chaff and jokes.

When the last crumb had disappeared, Walter filled one of the drinking cups with the crystal water and raised it up.

"A toast," he cried. "I drink to Camp Kill Kare!"

They all responded merrily.

"I'm going to look around this place a little," exclaimed Cora, rising to her feet.

"I'm just too comfortable to move," said Bess.

"So am I," echoed Belle.

"You're setting an example of pernicious activity," said Jack.

"I won't go far," Cora assured him.

She strolled about for a little while, picking an occasional flower and observing with interest the

nicks made in the trees by the woodchoppers. The woods closed around her and shut her out of sight of the others. But she gave no thought to this, for she knew that they could locate her by a call, even though she was invisible.

From the bushes in front of her, a mother bird darted out and ran along the ground, twittering sharply as though in pain or alarm. Cora gazed at her, and noticed that her wing was trailing as though broken.

Her sympathies were aroused in an instant.

"Poor little thing," she murmured to herself. "I wonder if I can't catch her and perhaps help set that wing."

She followed the bird for some distance, but it managed to keep just a little out of reach of her outstretched hand.

So much of design appeared in this that at last the truth dawned upon Cora, and she laughed outright.

"You little fibber!" she exclaimed. "You haven't any broken wing at all. You're just trying to draw me away from your nest, so that I sha'n't find your babies."

To make sure that her guess was correct, she followed the bird a little farther. Then the little creature seemed to realize that she had accomplished her object, and rising from the ground, she soared swiftly away.

"Sold!" laughed Cora to herself. "I'll have to tell the others about that. They'll have the laugh on me, of course, but it's too good to keep. But I'd better go back or they'll begin to get worried about me."

She turned in the direction of the picnic party, as she thought, and began to walk rapidly. But at the end of five minutes she saw no trace of them and a vague uneasiness began to take possession of her.

"That little cheat must have led me a good deal farther than I thought," she said to herself. "I guess I'd better call out to them."

She sent out a loud yodel, such as she and the other girls were accustomed to use as a call, and waited expectantly for an answer.

But no answer came.

She repeated the call, but with the same result.

"It must be these trees," she assured herself. "They smother the sound so that it can't go more than a few rods. I'll go on a little farther and try again."

She almost ran now, stumbling occasionally in her haste, and trying to crowd back an awful fear that was rapidly taking form.

Once more she stood still and called at the top of her voice, called desperately, frantically, repeatedly. But for all the response she received

she might as well have been in the center of the Sahara desert.

Then she stumbled over a tree root and rolled over and over down the mountain side, to bring up at last in a wilderness of brushwood.

She was dazed for a few moments by the fall, but soon realized that she was not hurt. She arose and pushed her way in a zigzag course, trying to mount the hillside down which she had fallen.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE WILDERNESS

CORA was lost!

For an hour past she had refused to admit it to herself. The utmost that she would concede was that she had become separated from her party. But that of course often happened, was bound to happen again and again, when one was out in the woods.

Jack and the rest must be looking for her as eagerly as she was for them. How heartily they would laugh and joke over the needless fears that had assailed her when she first realized that she was alone.

So she had reasoned with herself, thrusting resolutely into the background the terrible dread that kept trying to get possession of her mind, marshaling all the pathetic sophistries by which those in similar plight have tried to delude themselves from the beginning of the world. But with every moment that passed she grew more certain

of the truth, until she seated herself on a fallen tree, and, burying her face in her hands, gave way to the tears she tried in vain to hold back.

There was no use in blinking the fact. She was lost in the Adirondack wilderness, cut off for the time being from her friends, doomed perhaps to suffer incredible hardships before she should be rescued. She shuddered as she recalled instances of others, lost in that vast region, strong men, some of them, for whom rescue had arrived too late.

She pressed her fingers into her throbbing temples and tried to think. But her head swam, and it was only by a strong exertion of her will that she was able to pull herself together. It was some minutes before she had herself well in hand and was able to bring all her powers to bear on the problem before her. That problem had suddenly assumed gigantic proportions. Unless she solved it correctly, her life might pay the penalty.

"What shall I do?" she asked herself. "What shall I do?"

North, east, south, west, wherever she looked she could see nothing resembling a trail. In all that tangle of trees, rocks and undergrowth there was no indication that the foot of man had ever disturbed its solitude. And as Cora looked wildly about her, the forest seemed to mock her with a lurking smile as though taunting her helplessness.

But she resolutely crushed back the feeling of panic that clutched at her heart and hunted about desperately to get her bearings. It was ridiculous, she told herself, that she should not find something that would give her the needed clue.

She knew in a general way that the bungalow lay a little north of east. It was not much to go by, but if she could keep in that line it might make all the difference between safety and disaster.

But how was she to find the cardinal points? She had no compass with her. And then her heart gave a great bound as she thought of her watch!

Like all the Motor Girls, Cora, in her frequent journeyings, had picked up a good many points of woodcraft. Among others, she knew how by a simple device to locate the south, and with this as a starter find the other points of the compass.

Where she sat, the trees were so thick that a perpetual twilight reigned beneath. A little to the right, however, they thinned out somewhat, and rays of light fell through the foliage. Here was her chance to get an idea of the sun's location.

She went hurriedly to the spot and opening her watch carefully turned it until the figure twelve pointed directly at the sun. Then she measured half the distance between twelve and the hour hand and knew that this central point indicated due south. Directly opposite, of course, was

north. Standing, then, with her face to the north, it followed that the east was on her right hand and the west on her left.

She had a tiny penknife with her, and with this she cut two strips of bark and dovetailed them in the form of a cross, so that each of the four ends stood for one of the cardinal points. On these she cut the appropriate initials and carefully planted it in the ground at her feet. Then she put back her watch with a sigh of satisfaction.

Now she had at least a point of departure. All she had to do was to start in the right direction and depend upon further glimpses of the sun to correct her course from time to time.

From the beginning her progress was slow, owing to the absence of a trail and the necessity of forcing her way through the underbrush. At times she had to make a considerable detour, to avoid brush so thickly matted that she could not penetrate it. This of necessity threw her out of the course she was trying to keep. And her consternation was great to find, on reaching a more open spot, that the sun was now hidden by thick clouds.

Still she went doggedly on for two hours or more, taxing every ounce of courage and resolution that she possessed, finding a mental relief in the physical effort that kept her from dwelling too intently on her desperate plight. The after-

noon was rapidly waning and the gloom of the forest was deepening into dusk. And just then, panting with fatigue and exhaustion, her eye caught something familiar close to her feet.

It was the cross of bark that she had made two hours earlier!

This, then, was the reward of all her exertions. Obeying that inexorable and malign law that seems to hound desert and forest wanderers, she had worked around in a circle to the very point from which she had started!

For a moment it seemed to Cora that she must be dreaming. She could not bring herself to admit that all the toil and effort of the afternoon had come only to this. It was absurd, ridiculous! She rubbed her eyes and looked again. It was only too surely the fact. There was the little cross with the edges still raw from the blade of her knife.

Fate had played a cruel joke on her—a joke that might prove to be deadly. She had taxed her muscles until she was dropping with weariness, kept up her courage with the thought that she was making progress, only to find that all was utterly wasted, and that she was no nearer safety than when she had started. The reaction came on her with a rush and for a moment she thought she was going to faint.

Now, for the first time, the full horror of her

situation dawned on her. As long as she had kept in motion, she had been buoyed up by the thought that at any minute she might win her way to safety. But now her chance, for the day at least, was gone. She was alone, cut off from all human companionship in that vast wilderness, and night was coming on!

What was to be her fate? She had everything to live for, youth, health, friends, home and love. She was just on the brink of womanhood, and life ran at full tide through her veins. The future stretched before her, glowing with promise and with hands heaped high with treasures. She was just getting ready to drink the wine of life. Was the cup to be dashed rudely to the ground, just as she was lifting it to her lips?

For a little while she surrendered to these gloomy imaginings. The shock had been too severe for her to rally all at once. Then she took a grip on herself.

For it was not in Cora's nature to yield tamely to despair. Her heart was naturally brave and she came of fighting stock. It was good red blood that ran in Cora's veins, and now, as the first depression passed, it began to assert itself.

Not that she attempted longer to deceive herself. She admitted that her plight was desperate. But it was not hopeless. It never would be that, she told herself, as long as a spark of life was

left. She would work, plan, struggle and never give up.

But where would she find shelter for the night? In some dense thicket? In a hollow tree? She shuddered as she thought of spending the night entirely in the open. What wild animals might be abroad, coming out, soft-footed and wary, to make their nightly kill? She knew that there were bears, wolves and lynxes in these forests, and also rattlesnakes. Without anything approaching a weapon, what chance would she have in case of attack?

If she only had some matches! None of the beasts would dare to touch her if she were seated close to a roaring fire. They might prowl about and eye her hungrily, but no matter how famished or savage they were, they would not venture into that zone of flame.

But a fire was impossible. And as Cora realized this, she looked about her wildly, as though she expected even in the twilight to hear a stealthy footfall or see a pair of phosphorescent eyes glaring at her. She could almost hear the pounding of her heart.

She must find shelter in the few minutes of daylight that remained. There was nothing to gain and everything to lose by staying where she was. With a little prayer on her lips, she set off, choosing no particular direction, but trusting to Providence to direct her.

Five minutes later she gave a joyous cry, and ran forward to a tiny hut that stood in a little clearing.

It was a rude cabin of a single room. Its weather-beaten and dilapidated appearance showed that it had been knocked together a long time previously, probably by some trapper or hunter. Part of the thatched roof had sagged in, leaving rifts open to the sky.

On the earthen floor within were the ashes of a fire and several rusty pans and skillets, abandoned or forgotten by the last occupant. In the center was a bunk, consisting of four uprights, to which were fastened ropes that crossed and criss-crossed each other to form a rough mattress. A door swung loosely from the rusted hinges.

From all appearances, no one had been in the place for years. Cora rushed inside, pulled the door shut and slipped a bar that she found within into place. Then she sat down on the cord mattress and cried with thankfulness.

From all the terrors of a night spent in the open forest she was safe.

Night had fully fallen now, and the myriad voices of the forest were in full swing. It was nature's symphony on a colossal scale. Locusts, crickets and katydids sought to outdo each other. From the trees came the hoot of owls and the mournful notes of the whippoorwill.

Now that she was temporarily safe, Cora was conscious of being hungry. She had been so absorbed in her attempt to escape from the captivity of the forest that she had not even thought of food. Now she realized that her healthy appetite was clamoring for satisfaction.

Suddenly she remembered that she had slipped a tablet of chocolate in the pocket of her blouse that morning, to nibble at on the trip. She had forgotten all about it till now, and she thanked the fates for the oversight.

She drew it out, and as she did so she felt two other objects that she had not known were there. She drew them out and found that they were two cubes of compressed soup stock, wrapped in little pieces of waxed paper.

How on earth had they gotten there? Some trick played by Bess or Belle probably. They had slipped them in when she had not been looking, just for the sake of seeing her perplexed expression when she should discover them. That must be the explanation.

Her spirits rose with the discovery. If she could only have had a can of water and a fire, she could have made a delicious soup. But this was out of the question, and she had to content herself with putting one of the precious cubes in her mouth and letting it slowly dissolve. It was rather dry eating, but the nourishment was there.

She was sorely tempted to let the other cube and the tablet of chocolate take the same course, as all of them together would have made but a slender meal. But prudence spoke more loudly than appetite and she crushed down the temptation. Although it taxed her resolution sorely, she thrust them back into her pocket.

She lay down on the rude mattress, although she was sure that she would not close her eyes the whole night through. But she was utterly used up by the terrible strain of the day's experience, and tired nature demanded her rights. Sleep laid its soothing fingers on her eyelids, and all her troubles were, for the time being, forgotten.

CHAPTER XV

CONSTERNATION

It may have been the drowsy charm of the day, the soothing murmur of the brook, or the satisfying quality of the lunch, or perhaps a combination of the three, that made the little party under the trees so content to sit still or lie still for a considerable time after Cora left them.

"This is *dolce far niente* for fair," murmured Jack lazily.

"I'd agree with you," drawled Paul, "if I only knew what you meant. Talk United States."

"Why, it means something like 'the happiness of doing nothing,' I believe," explained Jack.

"It seems to make a hit with you," remarked Belle.

"It does," admitted Jack brazenly.

"I declare, you boys are like so many stuffed anacondas stretched out there," observed Bess.

"We're members of the Amalgamated Order of the Sons of Rest," said Walter.

"Come along, Belle," said Bess, rising. "If we stay here much longer we'll grow to be as lazy as they are. Let's go and find Cora. She's the only real live wire in the whole party."

"You do yourselves an injustice," Jack called after them.

The girls went off in the direction that Cora had taken, keeping a sharp lookout as they went along.

"It's queer that she hasn't come back of her own accord by this time," remarked Belle.

"She's probably gathering flowers," replied Bess. "There are so many beautiful varieties around here." But Belle grew more uneasy every second.

"I'm going to call her," she said, and gave the familiar yodel on which Cora herself had relied in vain.

But no answer came back, and the girls looked at each other with unrest in their eyes.

"Do you think she's teasing us by pretending not to hear?" asked Belle.

"No," replied her sister, "that wouldn't be like Cora. She knows how that would worry us."

"Let's try both together," suggested Belle, and they gave out a call in unison.

Again there was no response, and thoroughly frightened now, the girls ran back to their companions.

"Oh, Jack," exclaimed Belle, "we can't find Cora!"

"What!" cried the boys, leaping to their feet.

"It's true," confirmed Bess. "We've called her again and again, and we can't get any answer."

Jack grew pale beneath his coat of tan.

"It can't be!" he cried. "You didn't call loud enough. Cora, oh, Cora!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

Paul and Walter joined in with stentorian yells, but their united efforts had no result.

"There's got to be some quick work here, fellows!" cried Jack, a cold perspiration breaking out all over him. "You girls stay right here," he commanded. "Don't stir from this spot. We three fellows will spread out in a semicircle, and beat up the woods in the general direction that Cora started out in. We'll spread out as widely as we can, but we mustn't get so far apart that we can't hear each other shout. We'll keep calling out all the time, so as to keep in touch with each other. If at the end of half an hour we haven't found any trace of her, we'll know that she isn't in this section and we'll hurry back to the girls here. Then we'll raise a hue and cry and get the whole district out searching for her. Come along now and keep your voices going. And keep your eyes open, too. She may have met with an accident. Work, fellows! Work like mad!"

The others needed no urging, for they were wild with fear for Cora's safety.

For the next half-hour they yelled until they were hoarse, and covered as much territory as they could. They peered into every bush and thicket. Not one of them but thought of the ugly monster they had seen in the road that morning. Suppose one of this tribe had attacked the girl who was so dear to all of them? Suppose at that very moment she were lying somewhere helpless and dying?

They looked everywhere in an agony of apprehension, but Cora's wandering feet and her fall down the mountainside had already carried her far beyond sound or sight.

At the appointed time they rejoined the girls.

"No use," announced Jack, in a voice that he tried to keep firm, despite the working of his features. "I'll tell you what we'll do. You stay here, Paul, until further notice. If Cora comes back, you have an easy trail from here to the mill. There's a telephone there, and of course you'd call up Kill Kare at once with the good news. Walter and I will go back with Bess and Belle to the mill. Then Walter can drive the girls to Kill Kare in one of the cars, leave them with Aunt Betty, and bring Joel back with him to the mill. I'll get all the men that I can at the mill to join in the search. Those lumberjacks

know the woods thoroughly. Then, too, I'll telephone to all the neighboring towns and camps and call for volunteers. We'll comb these woods all day and all night until we find her."

He and Walter hurried off with the girls, leaving Paul behind. They reached the sawmill in record time, and leaving Jack there to explain the situation and carry out the plans agreed upon, Walter drove the girls home.

It had been thought at first that it would be well to leave Aunt Betty in ignorance of the affair, in order to spare her misery. But on second thought this idea had been dismissed. It would not be fair to her, in a matter of such moment, to treat her as a child, even with the best of motives. Besides it was morally certain that the girls would not be able to conceal their grief from her, no matter how hard they tried.

She was waiting for them as they drove up and greeted them with her usual kindly smile.

"Where are the others?" she inquired. "And what on earth is the matter with you two girls?" she added in quick alarm as she saw their eyes red and swollen with weeping.

"Don't be alarmed, Aunt Betty," said Walter, as lightly as he could. "The girls are a little worried because Cora strayed off a little way into the woods and we haven't found her. But she can't have gone very far, and we'll find her and have

her back to Kill Kare in a jiffy. Jack and Paul are looking for her now, and I'm going back to help them."

Aunt Betty gave a frightened exclamation and put her hand to her heart.

"Cora lost!" she ejaculated. "And in those awful woods! Oh, why did you let her get away from you? The poor darling girl!"

"We boys ought to be kicked from here to Jericho for letting her out of our sight," said Walter in savage self-reproach. "But the mischief's done now, and we've got to remedy it as best we can. You take care of the girls, Aunt Betty, while I go and hunt up Joel. I'm going to take him back with me."

He hurried away, leaving the three to condole with each other. He was lucky enough to find Joel in the barn, and hastily explained the state of affairs.

The big backwoodsman was thoroughly alarmed. Better than any one else at Kill Kare, he knew the dangers that threatened any tyro that ventured into that wilderness. There had been cases within his own knowledge where hapless wanderers had perished, even while the woods were alive with searching parties.

He put his hunting knife in his belt, grasped his rifle and hurried back with Walter to the sawmill.

Meanwhile, Jack told his story to the foreman, and received his instant sympathy and promise to help. He called for volunteers, and a number of the men who were working in the mill responded promptly. Some of them had already started out when Walter arrived, and others quickly followed.

Baxter too was stirred by the story and came out of his shell of reticence. He volunteered to take charge of the telephoning, leaving Jack to go out with the searching parties.

"I know personally the authorities in the nearest towns," he said, "and they'll be glad to oblige me in this. You're too excited and on edge to stay here, and I don't wonder. You go ahead and look for your sister and leave this to me. Before long I'll have a dozen parties out on the trail."

Jack gladly availed himself of the offer, and, in company with Walter and Joel, hurried with feverish haste up the hillside and plunged into the woods.

CHAPTER XVI

HELP FROM THE SKY

IT was full day when Cora awoke.

For a moment she looked around her, dazed. Then, as she realized where she was, she sprang from the rope mattress to the floor. All the events of the previous day rushed over her mind like a flood.

She was greatly rested and refreshed, although her muscles ached from contact with the rude mattress on which she had slept.

A sickening sense of her position sought to take possession of her, but she resolutely thrust it back. She would not begin this new day by being a coward.

She looked at her watch, but in the excitement of the day before she had forgotten to wind it, and it had stopped. She set it at a guess, and held it up to her ear a moment before she returned it to its place. Its lively ticking seemed to say: "Cheer up! cheer up! cheer up!"

She threw open the door and stepped outside. The sun had risen and was flooding the wilderness with glory. The cool morning air was delicious with the odor of the pines. She drank it in in great draughts, and it put new life and hope into her.

There was no sign of a stream anywhere near, and her ablutions had to be scanty. She found a little pool of water in a slight depression, and was able to wash her face and hands. She did not dare to drink of the standing water, but its external use refreshed her. Then she thought of breakfast.

It seemed a grim joke to call it that, when her whole food supply consisted of a soup cube and a chocolate tablet. But she hunted around in the vicinity of the cabin, and found some blackberry bushes that were fairly well laden. She picked the berries with great care, for she knew how fond snakes were of such localities, and she had a lively memory of the encounter with the rattlesnake the day before.

The berries and the chocolate tablet furnished her morning meal. It was not a substantial or satisfying one, and it required considerable self-control not to supplement it with the remaining soup cube. But after looking at it longingly, she put it back in her pocket. A time might come when it would be worth a king's ransom to her.

And now that she had eaten, Cora bent all her thoughts on the problem of escape.

What ought she to do? Ought she to leave the cabin that had proved an ark of safety and try once more to find her way through the trackless woods? Suppose night came on again, and she still found herself not only in the woods but far from the cabin.

Or would it be wiser to stay right where she was until her friends should find her? She knew perfectly well how desperately they were hunting for her. Her heart ached as she realized the agony they were suffering. She could see the wild distress on the features of Jack and the other boys, the tear-stained faces of Bess and Belle. She knew that by this time they would have raised a hue and cry that would set scores of people searching for her. Would they not have as good a chance of finding her where she was as anywhere else in the woods? In fact, would not some of the lumberjacks know of this lonely cabin in the forest, and think perhaps that she had sought refuge there?

To stay where she was meant inaction, the hardest thing in the world for her just then. She would have nothing to do but to think, and she would eat her heart out with anxiety.

On the other hand, she faced the perils of the woods if she left the shelter of the cabin. Bears

and panthers roamed the forest in the daytime as well as at night. Lynxes and wildcats, too, though less dangerous, were not to be despised, and there was the ever-present danger of snakes.

While she was pondering the best plan to pursue, she heard the humming of a motor.

She jumped to her feet in wild delight. Could that be the motor of a car with people searching for her? It must be. What else could it be?

But the next instant she realized, with a sinking of the heart, that no car could possibly penetrate those tangled woods.

Still the strident buzz persisted. It was a motor. She was too familiar with the sound to be mistaken.

She sprang to her feet, and as she did so a branch caught in the veil that was wound round her hat. She reached up to disentangle it, and her eyes rested on a tiny spot in the sky that was not a cloud, and that was momentarily growing larger.

Then she understood.

The motor was that of an aeroplane!

She ran to a more open spot where she could get a better view.

The aircraft was flying at a height of perhaps a thousand feet, and was moving at a high rate of speed. Nearer and nearer it came from out of the west, while Cora watched it with fascinated eyes.

Here was something that spoke of the great world that she seemed to have left behind. It was a link that brought her once more, if only for a moment, in contact with civilization.

And up there on a precarious perch, a mere atom in the blue immensity of the sky, was the aviator. How Cora envied him! No forest held *him* in its iron clutch. He was free as the bird whom he resembled in his flight. He could choose what path he would. He was free while she was a prisoner. Perhaps he was flying now straight toward friends and home and love. His roving eyes could perhaps at that moment see Camp Kill Kare, which she perhaps might never see again.

She dashed the tears from her eyes and looked again.

Now the aviator was flying lower. And his speed had perceptibly lessened. What did it mean? Was he seeking a more favorable current of air? Was he in doubt as to his course?

Louder and louder grew the buzz of the motor, and lower and lower came the plane. Like a giant bird, it was now describing great circles, and with every one its distance from the earth was lessened.

Cora's heart seemed as though it would leap out of her body. There was no doubt now of the aviator's intention. He was looking for a place to descend!

But where? If he came down anywhere near

where she was standing, he would be caught in the trees. But somewhere there must be an open spot that his keen eyes had descried, and it was there that he intended to make a landing.

Cora ran in the direction indicated by the plane.

She had gone perhaps two hundred yards, when she came to a large plateau which bore marks of having been swept at some time by a fire. So fierce had been the conflagration that trees and undergrowth alike had been burned to ashes in the holocaust. Even the stumps had crumbled into ashes, and there were several places in the wide expanse where a skillful aviator could make a landing without danger of injuring his machine.

As Cora came out into the open she saw that the choice had already been made. There was one long, graceful swoop, and then the giant flyer settled on the ground with scarcely a jar, ran for fifty feet or so on its wheels and stopped.

The aviator climbed out, rather painfully, as though cramped from long sitting. He rubbed his legs and flung his arms about vigorously as though to restore the circulation. Then he took some tools from a box under the seat and began to make some repairs in the motor.

His back was toward Cora, and the latter was running across the field to him when she suddenly stopped.

Who knew what this man might be? She was

alone in this wilderness. Could she trust him?

But her hesitation was only momentary. Most men were chivalrous.

The aviator was on his knees as she approached. He heard her coming and sprang to his feet, very visibly startled.

"I didn't mean to startle you," panted Cora, with an attempt to smile. "I saw you come down here and I ran over as fast as I could. I had to see you, because I'm lost out here in the woods, and I was sure you would help me."

He was of medium height. The garments in which he was wrapped to protect him from the intense cold of the upper air made it impossible to tell whether his form was large or slender.

"You poor child!" exclaimed the stranger in great surprise and sympathy. "Don't be afraid to tell me all about it," he said. "Look!"

He took off his hat, and Cora's startled eyes saw two large braids of hair coiled tightly about his head.

The aviator was a woman!

The next moment she had her arms about Cora, and the latter was sobbing as though her heart would break.

"There, there, my dear," said the newcomer, patting Cora's disheveled hair, "go ahead and cry all you want to. It will do you good, and I know just how you feel. But you're all right now."

The revulsion from despair to joy had been so great that it was some minutes before Cora recovered her self-control.

"Oh," she exclaimed at last, as she smiled radiantly through her tears, "I'm so happy that I can hardly bear it! Surely God has sent you to me."

"I believe so," smiled the other, who herself was a mere girl, not much older than Cora herself. "But now go ahead and tell me just how you came to be lost."

She listened with the greatest sympathy and interest while Cora narrated all that had happened to her since the day before.

Then in her turn she explained that she was making a cross-country flight from Chicago to New York. She was bent on beating the best record ever made for the distance by either man or woman, and was in a fair way to do it.

"My engine began working badly a little while ago," she explained. "The ignition was balky and I thought I'd better come down and fix it before it got worse."

Cora looked at her with admiration, and expressed it warmly.

"I don't see how you dare to take such risks," she said. "It must take a tremendous amount of courage."

"Oh, I don't know," said the other modestly. "But there's a lot of satisfaction in beating the men

at their own game," she added mischievously.

"We women all owe you a lot for doing it," laughed Cora happily. "It does the men good to have some of the conceit taken out of them. But just the same I startled you when I appeared so suddenly at your side," she added, with a spark of mischief in her eyes.

"Yes," admitted the other. "I didn't know that I was within miles of anybody at all you see."

"I'm sorry," murmured Cora, but the sportive look remained on her face.

"Well, now, I'll just put the finishing touch on the engine and then I'll be ready," said the aviatrix, who had introduced herself as Ruth Moore. "And you shall go with me."

"Me! With you?" gasped Cora.

"Yes. Why not? My machine has an extra seat. And you want to get out of this wilderness."

Miss Moore set to work, Cora assisting her, and the aircraft was soon ready to continue its flight.

"I never thought I'd be taking my first ride in an aircraft under such conditions," remarked Cora as her companion strapped her in.

"You're sure you won't be afraid?" asked Miss Moore, looking at her searchingly.

"I'm so happy at getting away from these awful woods that I'm not afraid of anything," replied

Cora. "Then, too, I'm used to motor cars and motor boats, and that ought to help me in keeping my nerve. You needn't be afraid. I won't make any fuss."

"You're a girl after my own heart," laughed Miss Moore, as she adjusted herself in her seat. "Sit perfectly still now and leave everything to me."

She touched a lever and the aeroplane ran along a few yards and then soared skyward.

CHAPTER XVII

A JOYFUL REUNION

CORA gasped as the aircraft mounted into the sky and she saw the earth falling away from her. It was the newest and greatest thrill in her experience.

Her first sensation was that of detachment. She seemed to be floating in a sea of ether. Everything was impalpable, intangible. It seemed to be her astral body that was moving through space. All that was material seemed to have been thrown aside like a cast-off garment.

Her next impression was that of silence. All earthly noises had been stilled. The song of birds, the rustling of leaves that had made the forest vocal had died away. It seemed as though the world had been suddenly stricken dumb. The only sound was that of the motor with its monotonous hum.

"Like it?" called out Miss Moore, looking at her with a smile.

"Do I?" replied Cora. "It's just heavenly!"

The aviatrix gazed at her with approval. She had found a kindred spirit.

"You're a thoroughbred," she said. "Many girls would be frightened to death. They'd be begging me to descend."

"No danger of my doing that," laughed Cora. "I could go on like this forever, if I were not so anxious to get back to my friends."

They were flying now at a height of five hundred feet, and the air, despite the August sun, was cold. Miss Moore had given Cora a coat and a pair of gloves from her kit, however, so that she was fairly well protected.

"What a glorious view!" exclaimed Cora ecstatically, as the vast panorama of field and forest unrolled itself as far as the eye could see.

"Oh, how I envy you!"

Miss Moore smiled.

"It is beautiful," she assented. "But I'm kept so busy with listening to my engine and shaping my course that I don't have as much time to enjoy it as I would like to. That's one of the advantages of being a passenger. But look around now, and see if you can recognize your camp. I'll make a landing as near to it as I can."

Cora looked eagerly about.

"There's the sawmill!" she exclaimed. "And there's the road that leads from there to Kill

Kare," she added. "All you have to do is to follow that road south for a few miles, and we'll come to the house. And there's a big cleared space around it that will make a splendid landing place for the aeroplane."

Miss Moore turned in the indicated direction, and followed the road that Cora had pointed out.

"I can never thank you enough for rescuing me as you have," said Cora, her voice broken with emotion.

"It's made me almost as happy as it has you," returned Miss Moore. "It will be one of the pleasantest memories of my life."

"But it's delayed you on your trip, hasn't it?"

"Suppose it has?" replied Miss Moore. "Do you suppose I would have hesitated on that account to bring you home? But set your mind at rest on that score. I was an hour or more ahead of my schedule anyway. You see," she added gaily, "we girls can give the men a handicap and yet beat them out."

Cora laughed gleefully.

"Of course we can!" she exclaimed. "But oh, Miss Moore, there's dear old Kill Kare now! See, over there among the trees."

"I see it," was the reply, as Miss Moore's practised eye looked out for the landing place.

She touched a lever and began to descend in a sweeping curve.

When Jack and Walter, together with Joel, reached the picnic ground, they found that Paul had not been idle. He had been searching for Cora in ever widening circles during every moment of their absence, but a glance at his disconsolate face showed that he had learned nothing.

Some of the workers from the mill had already scattered in the woods, going in different directions. Other volunteers came straggling in until the number had reached a score. Joel, because of his knowledge of the woods, was put in general charge of the search.

Anticipating that Cora might not be found before dark closed in, torches were prepared in large numbers and distributed among the men. It was arranged that the place where they now were should be the general rendezvous, at which all the searching parties would report, and to which Cora should be brought as soon as found.

Most of the men had either rifles or revolvers, and a copious supply of ammunition was furnished by the foreman of the mill. Joel had brought from the barn a number of skyrocketes that had been left over from the previous Fourth of July celebration, and it was arranged that one of these should be set off every hour through the night. By following the course of this and marking the direction from which it came, the searching parties could keep the location of the camp in mind.

It was hoped also that Cora might see them and thereby be guided in the right direction.

Paul had driven back to Kill Kare, and had secured unlimited food and coffee for the refreshment of the searchers, in case the hunt was prolonged.

All through the waning afternoon the search continued. And with the coming of night it doubled in intensity. Fresh parties took the place of exhausted ones that came straggling back. The woods were alive with torches.

It seemed certain that, with so many hunters, success ought to have been almost certain. But Joel knew that twenty times that number might search in that vast wilderness without running across the one they sought. At best it was a gamble, with the odds against them.

Morning came and found the boys fairly dropping with fatigue and torn with grief and disappointment. Jack was almost out of his mind with reflecting on his sister's plight.

"We'll drive back to Kill Kare and telegraph for bloodhounds," he said. "Joel says that there are a couple he knows of at the county seat. If they're sent on the early train to the nearest town they ought to get here by noon. We'll put them to work at once, and see what they can do."

They left Joel in charge of the search, and drove back gloomily to Camp Kill Kare.

There was plenty of "care" there that morning. Neither Aunt Betty nor the girls had been able to sleep. The thought of Cora out in the wilderness all through that long night had driven them fairly frantic.

And their hearts sank still further when the boys came back to report their failure.

"We ought to telegraph to your mother at once," declared Aunt Betty, wringing her hands.

"It would almost kill mother to get a telegram like that," said Jack moodily. "It wouldn't do any good, and in the meantime Cora may be found. We'll wait, anyway, until after we've tried the bloodhounds."

They ate briefly and scantily of breakfast, for none of them had any heart for food. Then they went outside to make ready for their trip to the rendezvous.

The boys were piling into the car when Belle gave a sudden exclamation and pointed upward.

"There's an aeroplane!" she cried.

They followed her gaze and saw the aircraft coming toward them at a rapid rate.

As they looked, they saw that it was beginning to slacken speed and at the same time was coming closer to earth.

"Looks as though it were going to land somewhere about here," remarked Jack. "Perhaps it's having trouble."

As it drew closer they could see that there were two people in it.

"And one of them's a woman!" cried Walter, as he noted the fluttering of a skirt.

"She's waving at us!" exclaimed Belle excitedly. Then her voice rose to a scream.

"It's Cora! It's Cora!"

"Cora!" shrieked Bess.

"Cora!" echoed Aunt Betty.

As for the boys, they gave one look and tumbled out of the automobile, yelling, shouting, thumping each other on the back. The girls sobbed and laughed, and hugged Aunt Betty and each other. None of them had the least idea of what they were doing or saying, and none of them cared. They were fairly mad with joy.

They ran out under the plane as it circled around looking for its landing. And when it settled down as gracefully as a swan and finally stopped, there was a wild rush for it, and the next second Cora was unstrapped, dragged from her seat and was being devoured with hugs and kisses.

It was all incoherent and frantic and broken, as great revulsions of feeling have a way of being. It was impossible to find words adequate to their delight, and it is safe to say that at that moment there was no happier group of people than that which wept and laughed on the lawn at Camp Kill Kare.

The aviatrix sat looking on through all this tumult with a happy smile.

As soon as Cora could extricate herself from the arms that clung about her as though they never intended to let her go, she turned to her deliverer.

"You see what you have done for me," she laughed through her tears.

"They certainly seem glad to see you," was the response.

They all crowded around and showered her rescuer with thanks, as Cora introduced them. They were astounded to find that it was to a woman that Cora owed her safety. Most of them had heard her name in connection with flying exploits, and they were earnest in their compliments and congratulations.

When a few minutes later Miss Moore resumed her flight, every eye remained fixed on the plane until at last it melted into space. Then they resumed their rejoicings over the wanderer who had been so strangely brought back from the wilderness.

CHAPTER XVIII

GOOD NEWS TRAVELS FAST

A PERFECT delirium of happiness reigned at Kill Kare that morning. From being an abode of deep gloom, it had suddenly been transformed into a corner of Paradise.

For Cora was back again! Here she was, a little trembly about the mouth, a little teary about the eyes, her hands and arms bearing the marks of scratches where they had come in contact with thorns, her garments torn from pushing her way through the underbrush, but with no damage that a warm bath and a good breakfast and a long sleep would not repair.

They brought her in triumph into the house and seated her at the breakfast table that they had just deserted, while Aunt Betty and the maid hurried about to prepare her something hot and comforting.

"I ought to go to my room first and freshen up and change my clothes," the girl objected, her

purely feminine instincts coming to the fore, now that she was once more in touch with civilization. "I must look a prefect fright."

"Just at this moment you are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," declared her brother fervently.

"That's what!" confirmed Walter. "We've been wanting to see you so badly that now we can't bear to take our eyes off you."

"You're not going to get out of our sight again in a hurry," maintained Paul.

As for Bess and Belle, their voices broke so when they tried to speak that they had to content themselves with pats and hugs.

As for Aunt Betty, she went around hardly knowing, as she declared, whether she was awake or dreaming, while she laughed and cried at the same time.

"Such a hideous nightmare as this has been!" ejaculated Jack, as he hugged his sister for the twentieth time.

"You must be nearly starved to death, you poor darling!" exclaimed Bess.

"Haven't you had anything to eat since yesterday noon?" asked Belle.

"Not enough to give me indigestion," laughed Cora—she could laugh now, though a few hours before she had thought she could never laugh again. "A soup cube and a chocolate tablet can

hardly be called overfeeding, though I did have a few blackberries to help out. But even at that I have some provisions left," and she took the remaining soup cube out of her pocket.

Bess pounced upon it.

"One of the two I slipped into your pocket for a joke yesterday morning!" she exclaimed.

"It was a very lucky joke for me," smiled Cora. "I'm going to have this one framed as a memento of my escape."

There was something more nourishing and abundant before her now, and she did it full justice, while the others looked on happily.

Then, when she had partially satisfied her hunger, questions poured in upon her in a flood, and she had to narrate all the details of her experience from the moment she had been beguiled by the shamming mother bird to the never-to-be-forgotten moment when she had heard the humming of the aircraft motor in the sky.

"If help ever came from heaven it did that time!" she said tremulously, and they all agreed with her most fervently.

"And, oh, girls," she said to Bess and Belle, "if you only knew how I felt when she spoke, and, almost at the same moment, I saw those two braids on the aviator's head and realized that I was talking to a woman!"

"We know," the girls assured her soothingly.

"She's a dandy!" exclaimed Jack emphatically.

"You bet she is!" declared Walter.

"She's as plucky as they make 'em," said Paul.

"I only hope she beats the record."

"I'd like to be there at Governor's Island to greet her when she comes down," said Jack.

"Even if she puts the men in the shade by beating their time?" asked Bess mischievously.

"Even so," said Jack stoutly.

"Cora's got the start on all of us now," laughed Bess. "We're only motor girls but now she's an aviator girl."

"Weren't you frightened just a tiny bit when you felt yourself going up in the air?" asked Belle.

"Not a bit," replied Cora. "Possibly I might have been if the circumstances had been different. But I was so delighted to get away from those dreadful woods that nothing else mattered. I think I'd have ridden on a lion's back, if he'd promised to bring me home."

The girls took charge of Cora now, and although the boys remonstrated, she was borne away to her room to rest and bathe and change her clothes.

"And now," said Jack, drawing a long breath, "it's up to us to get busy and call off the searching parties. I suppose I ought to have done it the moment Cora landed, but for the life of me I couldn't tear myself away."

"You're excusable," laughed Walter. "But you stay right at home, old man, with your sister. Paul and I will get on the job and attend to everything."

Jack protested, but they would take no denial. They jumped into the car and whizzed down to the sawmill.

They found the foreman and Baxter deep in consultation. The latter saw at once from the boys' faces that they had good news, and hurried to meet them.

"We've got her!" cried Walter.

"Safe and sound at Kill Kare," added Paul.

"You don't say!" exclaimed the foreman with a broad smile.

"Bully!" cried Baxter in great relief.

"Where did you find her?" asked the foreman.

"We didn't find her at all," grinned Paul. "She found us."

"Came back by the sky route," chuckled Walter.

Then, as they saw the mystified looks, they hastened to explain.

"That aeroplane!" exclaimed Baxter. "We were watching it fly over here a little while ago."

"It was too far up for us to see that there were two in it," remarked the foreman. "Well, I guess Miss Kimball can claim that she's the only person that has ever been brought out of the woods in any such way as that."

"And by a woman aviator, too," observed Baxter. "I've never had much faith in women taking up flying, but I'm glad now they have. It beats the Dutch what the women are doing these days."

"They'll make us men take to cover if we don't watch out," laughed Walter. "But now we've got to hustle and call off the men who are beating the woods. We can't thank you folks enough for all you have done for us."

"We'd like to leave some money with you to pay the men for their trouble and time," added Paul.

"Not a cent," said the foreman decidedly. "Their wages go on just the same, and they'd only feel hurt if you offered it. It's just a case of common humanity, and they've all been glad to volunteer."

"Well, anyway," said Paul, "we'll have a big open air spread on the lawn at Kill Kare to celebrate Miss Kimball's safe return, and we want all the sawmill crew up there to the last man."

"That's different," grinned the foreman. "They'll all come to that. But you're taking a pretty big contract if you undertake to give a spread to my lumberjacks."

"You can't frighten us," laughed Walter. "We'll fill them up to the chin."

Baxter undertook to telephone the news to all those whom he had previously called upon for

help, and the boys, leaving their car at the mill, hastened to the rendezvous in the forest.

Joel was in charge, and a number of weary searchers who had dragged themselves in were sitting about, munching sandwiches and drinking coffee.

The boys whooped out a yodel as soon as they came in sight, and waved their hats.

The men jumped to their feet, and Joel came running out to meet the bearers of good news.

"Thank the good Lord!" he exclaimed, as he saw their jubilant faces. "I don't need to ask what's happened. You've found 'er."

"We've got her," beamed Paul.

"An' wuzn't she hurt none?" asked Joel.

"Nothing but a few scratches."

The men crowded round with eager questions, and their delight was unbounded, for none knew better than they what risks Cora had run in those trackless woods.

One of the men volunteered to stay behind and notify the other searchers as they should come in, and then, with hearts light as thistledown, the boys and Joel retraced their steps to the mill, jumped into the car and "burned up" the road on the way to Kill Kare.

They had gone perhaps half the distance when they saw a figure on the side of the road that somehow seemed familiar.

They slowed up a little as the man approached, and then Paul gave a low whistle.

"It's that old pirate that took the gypsy girl away from us the other morning!" he ejaculated.

"So it is," replied Walter, as he took a closer look. "I wonder what the old rascal is doing around here."

"Up to no good, I'll be bound," remarked Joel, his old antipathy toward the vagrant people asserting itself.

"I've a good mind to speak to him," said Paul, who was driving, as he slowed up a little.

"What's the use?" replied Walter. "You won't get anything out of him that he doesn't want to tell you. And that'll be mighty little, or I miss my guess."

The gypsy had looked up as the car approached, and it was apparent that he had recognized the boys, for the same scowl came over his face that they had seen on the first occasion of meeting.

"Hello, friend," said Paul, as the car stopped close beside the gypsy.

The man looked at him sullenly, but did not respond.

"Is your camp anywhere around here?" asked Walter.

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"No understand," he said blankly.

They tried again with the same result, and as

there was evidently no chance of getting an answer, they drove on.

"If we'd promised to give him a five dollar bill, he'd have understood all right," laughed Walter.

"I'll bet he's prospecting around to find a good location for the camp," observed Paul.

"It's time then to put double locks on houses and barns," growled Joel. "I'd hoped thet I'd never see hide nur hair uv them light-fingered varmints ag'in."

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNINVITED GUEST

CORA was not visible when the party drove up to the bungalow, for Aunt Betty and the girls had put her to bed, with strict injunctions that she should stay there for the rest of the day. She had objected at first, but at last had yielded. And to tell the truth, she was not sorry to yield to their gentle compulsion, for although she was little the worse physically from her adventure, she had been under a terrific nervous strain that had taxed her heavily.

But she appeared at supper time, fresh and radiant, her eyes sparkling and her spirits high.

"I declare it's almost worth being lost for the sake of being made so much of when one gets back," she declared, with a loving look round at the circle of friends, who could scarcely take their eyes off her.

"Why shouldn't we make much of one who comes to us straight from the skies?" said Walter.

"There's one less angel up there now," added Paul.

"But don't let me catch you running away again, sis," said Jack, with mock severity. "We'll forgive you this time, but once is plenty. I don't know but what I ought to put a ball and chain on you as it is."

"You needn't worry," answered Cora. "I'm cured. I'll stick to the rest of you now closer than your shadows."

"By the way," remarked Walter, as he passed his plate, "we met an old friend of yours on our way back from the mill this morning."

"Who was that?" asked Cora with interest.

"Give you three guesses," teased Paul.

She ventured several names and then gave it up.

"It was that dark-skinned gypsy who interfered the other morning, when you girls were going to have your fortunes told," said Walter.

Cora was all interest in an instant.

"And did you see the girl?" she asked eagerly.

"She wasn't along," replied Paul. "The man was all by his lonesome."

"A regular brigand he was, too," commented Walter. "I'd hate to meet him at night in a dark alley."

"We tried to talk to him," explained Paul, "but he shut up like a clam. Pretended he couldn't understand."

"The rest of the gypsies can't be far off," observed Belle.

"Wouldn't it be fine if they camped somewhere in this neighborhood?" said Bess.

"I wish they would," replied Cora. "I'm crazy to have another talk with that gypsy girl."

"I'm afraid Joel doesn't share your sentiments," laughed Walter. "To speak of gypsy to him is like waving a red rag at a bull."

"They're not very likely to settle down here," declared Jack. "They usually pitch their tents somewhere in the vicinity of a town, so that they can have plenty of visitors. The nearest place to this spot they'd be likely to fix on is Wilton. That's quite a good-sized town, and there's a big summer hotel there. But that's as much as four miles away."

"What's distance to us as long as we have the cars?" said Cora. "For that matter, it wouldn't be too far to walk. I wish you boys would keep your eyes and ears open and let us know if you find out anything about them."

They promised readily, but several days passed without any scrap of news from the wandering tribe.

One other bit of news, however, gave them unqualified pleasure. They learned from a paper that Jack secured on a trip to a neighboring town that Miss Moore had safely landed at Governor's

Island and had broken all records for a cross-country flight.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" exclaimed Cora, clapping her hands. "I've been worrying ever since that morning for fear I'd caused her to lose, and I know how much her mind was set on winning."

And forthwith she dispatched a telegram, care of the Aero Club, that read:

"Your grateful passenger sends warmest love and congratulations."

And it may well be guessed that few of the messages that overwhelmed Miss Moore on the completion of her wonderful feat brought her more real satisfaction than this.

"I'm pining away for a trip on the lake," announced Belle, one beautiful morning a few days later.

"Let's picnic up at the farther end of the lake," said Cora. "I noticed the loveliest spot for an outing the last time we were up there."

"Your wish is our command," said Jack with exaggerated courtesy. "I'd have suggested it before, if I hadn't thought you girls might feel a wee bit nervous about the *Water Sprite* after the narrow escape we had last time. But we've spent a good deal of time in fixing her up since then, and now she's perfectly safe."

"We're not a bit afraid," was the unanimous verdict of the girls.

"And let's get a few fish on the way," said Walter. "There's nothing that tastes better than a fish fry under the trees. And I know a way of broiling them on oak twigs that will make you think you're eating ambrosia. I'll be chef and Jack and Paul can clean the fish."

"Such a chance!" exclaimed Paul. "You'll do your share of the cleaning, and don't you forget it!"

"You'd better catch the fish before you fall to scrapping over them," remarked Cora.

"You boys go ahead and get your bait," commanded Belle, "while we get on our boating suits."

"We fellows seem to be unanimously elected to do all the work," remarked Jack. "I suppose you girls will want us to put the worms on the hooks for you, too."

"Likely enough," admitted Bess.

"Worms, little boys?" sniffed Belle.

"Bent pins, too, for hooks," suggested Cora.

"Worms make a perfectly satisfactory bait, and don't you forget it!" declared Walter.

"Bet the fish swallow those worms so greedily our arms will ache pulling them in so fast," added Jack.

While the boys prepared the fishing tackle and dug the bait, Aunt Betty saw to it that an ample

lunch was prepared, and by the time the girls came down, dressed for the trip, everything was in readiness.

They made their way down to the shore of the lake, and a cry of surprise and delight broke from the lips of the girls when they caught sight of the motor boat.

For it was a new, a rejuvenated, *Water Sprite* that met their eyes. She had been dowdy and disreputable when she had taken them out on the first trip. But the boys had made several surreptitious trips to the nearest town, and had come back laden with sundry cans of paint and varnish.

They had worked like troopers, painting the boat from stem to stern, varnishing the deck and the interior of the cabin, and cleaning every bit of the brass work until it shone like gold.

The *Water Sprite* was a perfect picture now, as she floated gracefully at the end of the little pier, her ivory white coat of paint contrasting beautifully with the rich brown of the deck tints and her name showing in gold letters on her stern.

"Isn't she a darling?" exclaimed Bess ecstatically.

"She's a dream!" asseverated Belle.

"So that's what you boys have been up to on these mysterious trips of yours, is it?" asked Cora, shaking her finger at them.

"Caught with the goods," grinned Jack.

"Guilty, with extenuating circumstances," admitted Walter.

"We throw ourselves on the mercy of the court," laughed Paul.

"You see," explained Jack, "it didn't seem the right thing to us that such pretty girls should sail in such a shabby boat."

"Well, all I have to say is that you boys are perfect darlings to go to all this trouble for us," declared Bess emphatically.

"It looks like

" 'An ivory shallop, silken-sailed,' "

quoted Belle.

"Except that there are no sails," laughed Cora. "But the ivory part is all right. Really, girls, it looks almost too pretty to use. Talk about Cleopatra's barge!"

"There was only one queen on that, while we have three," grinned Walter. "But come along, girls. I want you to catch those fish, so I can show you what a peach of a cook I am."

The girls went on board in high glee, Paul cast off the moorings, Jack started the engine to chugging, and Walter this time took charge of the wheel.

The *Water Sprite* darted off proudly, as though

conscious she was looking her best. The boys had not been content with mere decoration, but had made a thorough job of fixing the hull as well, and this time there was no danger of wet feet.

They went down the lake some distance, and then Jack stopped the engine, and the *Water Sprite* floated about lazily, while they baited the hooks and threw out the lines.

"I've got a bite," said Jack suddenly.

"Does it hurt?" asked Walter solicitously.

Bess giggled, and the others joined in when Jack hauled up a lot of dripping weeds.

"Old Izaak Walton had nothing on you as a fisherman," chaffed Paul.

But the laugh was on him a moment later, when a voracious pickerel made off with his hook and sinker, and he ruefully pulled up his broken line.

Cora was the first to score, landing a big flopping perch to an accompaniment of little squeals from Bess and Belle.

From that time on the luck was good, and before long they had a number of perch and pickerel, together with enough bass to supply all they needed for an abundant dinner.

"I guess we're pretty well fixed now," said Jack, as he eyed the pile of fish. "What do you say now to hustling along and giving Walter a chance to make good on that frying proposition? I think he's bragging, if you ask me."

"You do, eh?" retorted Walter. "If you clean the fish as well as I cook them there'll be nothing left to ask for."

They started up the boat again, and before long were near the end of the lake. They went along slowly, trying to find the special place that Cora had referred to.

"There it is!" she exclaimed at length. "See! Right in that little cove."

She pointed to a little indentation in the shore where the trees had thinned out so as to leave an open space carpeted with velvety, springing turf. Near by, a tiny promontory extended into the water, and here it was deep enough for the *Water Sprite* to float without touching bottom.

"What a lovely spot!" exclaimed Belle.

"A little bit of Eden," seconded her sister.

"And a dandy place to land," commented Jack. "We can fasten a rope to that tree and step ashore without having to wade."

The boys helped the girls ashore, and followed them, bringing along their catch.

While the girls emptied the contents of the lunch basket and spread the good things about in a shady spot, Walter gathered some wood, dug a hole in the ground and lighted a roaring fire. As the flames died down he carefully raked the embers into the hole, until he had a small furnace that gave forth an intense heat.

Then he prepared a skillet of oak twigs dexterously twisted together, and was ready. Jack and Paul in the meantime had been cleaning the fish.

"Hurry up, you common laborers," ordered Walter in a lordly tone. "Don't keep an artist waiting."

A fish-head whizzed past his ear and he hastily sought refuge behind a tree.

"Bad shooting," he taunted.

"Good enough to make you duck," retorted Jack.

"While these rough-necks are disturbing the peace," drawled Walter, "it might be a good idea to get some of those blackberries up there. They'll come in handy for dessert."

He pointed to a group of bushes about a hundred feet distant.

"I'll go," volunteered Belle, rising to her feet. "You girls go on getting things ready. This lunch basket is empty now and I'll take it along for the berries."

She started to pick busily, while Walter, taking the fish that had been cleaned, began to broil them over the fire.

A delicious, tantalizing savor rose from the oak skillets, and promised to justify all that Walter had claimed for his cooking.

"Hurry up, Belle!" called Cora. "Walter's nearly finished now, and we're all ravenous."

"I'll be with you in a minute," sang out Belle, "but there's one big bush here that's just dying to be picked."

She moved toward it, but stopped in fright as she heard a grunt and snort on the other side of the bush.

The next instant she found herself looking into the eyes of a big black bear!

CHAPTER XX

THE GREEDY MARAUDER

FOR a moment Belle stood paralyzed with fright.

The bear gazed at her unwinkingly, and his hair began to rise slowly on his head as he gave vent to a savage growl.

Then Belle screamed wildly, dropped her basket, which was half full of berries, and ran towards the other members of the party, who had risen and rushed to meet her.

"What is it?" they cried in chorus.

"A bear!" shrieked Belle, pointing to the thicket.
"Oh, run, run!"

And at this moment the bear emphasized the wisdom of this advice by shambling into full sight.

The boys each possessed themselves of the arm of one of the girls and hurried them to the boat. They put them aboard, rapidly untied the rope that held the *Water Sprite*, and themselves jumped in.

Then with a united push they sent the *Water Sprite* away from the bank, Jack started the engine going faster than he ever had before, and in a moment more they were fifty feet out on the lake.

Then only did they dare to draw breath.

It was perhaps lucky for them that Belle had dropped her basket right in the path of the bear. The piles of luscious fruit that had rolled out proved a temptation too strong to resist. He nuzzled into them luxuriously, and when he raised his head his nose looked as though it were dripping with paint.

They had a good view of him now, and they shuddered as they saw what a large and shaggy specimen he was. The bear looked at them too and snarled as if with disappointment at their escape.

"Beauty, isn't he?" demanded Paul.

"Looks like a nightmare to me," observed Walter.

"How lucky that Belle saw him first and gave warning," said Cora. "It would have been nice, wouldn't it, to have been sitting at lunch and have looked up to see him standing beside us?"

"I know what it means now to have your tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth," said Belle, who was pale and shaken. "I thought I never would be able to scream."

The bear resumed his shambling gait and meandered leisurely down to the pile of fish.

"The robber!" groaned Walter. "He'll clean up the pile. To think I've been cooking for that old reprobate!"

"You ought to take it as a compliment," said Jack. "Just see how the old thief is wading into them."

The fish were indeed disappearing with magical rapidity.

"He's a magician," said Jack. "He's making mutton of fish."

"It's well enough to joke," murmured Bess. "But what will we do if he eats all the rest of our lunch?"

"We'll have to grin and bear it," said Paul, whose disposition to pun could not be overcome.

"Perhaps he'll be satisfied with the fish and leave the rest of the food alone," remarked Cora hopefully.

"You're a cheerful optimist," replied her brother. "You don't know much about a bear's appetite. Besides, he must be awfully hungry, otherwise he would run away—bears usually do."

"Oh, if I only had a rifle here!" said Paul.

"A dynamite bomb would be good enough for me," growled Walter.

"Haven't we anything on board we can soak him with?" groaned Jack.

"Nothing much, except some loose bolts and nuts in the locker," answered Cora, "and they wouldn't do any good, except perhaps to aggravate him."

"It might get his mind off the rest of the lunch, anyway," replied her brother. "Let's get a handful, fellows, and bombard the old brigand."

They were all smarting for revenge, and they equipped themselves with the missiles and began to throw. Several of them hit the bear, but he paid no attention.

"We're too far off," said Walter. "The force of the bolts is spent before they get to him. Back up a little closer to the shore, Jack, and we'll have a better chance."

"Do you think we'd better?" asked Belle. "He might get stirred up and come after us. Bears are good swimmers, you know."

"He couldn't catch a motor boat in a thousand years," replied Jack. "If it were a rowboat now, it might be different."

He backed up until the boat was within ten feet of the shore. Walter threw a bolt with such accurate aim that it caught the bear right on the end of his nose.

He reared up with an ugly roar, and his little eyes shot flames of fire at his adversaries.

He offered a fair mark as he stood erect, and Jack had an inspiration. Hanging over the side

of the *Water Sprite* was one of the life-preservers, the round type, a circle with a very large opening in the center, so that it could be easily slipped over the head.

Jack snatched it up and threw it with the motion of a quoit-thrower. It covered the short intervening distance and went over the bear's head, settling on his neck and looking for all the world like a gigantic ruff. It gave the animal a most grotesque appearance, and the spectators roared with laughter.

It was easier for it to go on than it was for the bear to get it off, and his antics were comical as he rubbed his head against the trees and, failing in that, took his paws to it. He succeeded at last, but his naturally surly nature had not been improved by the operation, and the instant the life-preserver was dislodged, he rushed to the edge of the shore and plunged into the water.

The action was so sudden that the party was taken by surprise. The girls screamed, and the boys had to do some quick work to get the *Water Sprite* under way. They succeeded, however, and once the engine was going, it was an easy matter to keep out of the bear's reach, although for so clumsy a creature he swam with amazing swiftness.

They could have distanced him without trouble, but with deliberate purpose Jack kept just far

enough ahead of him to encourage him in thinking that he might overtake his quarry. In this way, he drew him down along the shore of the lake for more than half a mile. By that time, Bruin's ardor had cooled and his strength began to fail. He gave a wrathful snort and made for the shore.

The instant he did so, Jack turned the boat about and made all speed back to the place where they had been surprised.

"Now's our chance, fellows," he said. "We can get there long before the bear does, even if he makes a bee line for it as soon as he gets to shore. I'll hold her bow against the bank, while you jump out and gather up the provisions and bring them on board. That thief may have got our fish, but he won't have the laugh on us altogether."

It was very quick work that Paul and Walter did, for they had no mind to be caught there when the bear should make his way back, as they had no doubt he would. They regained the life preserver, which was so scratched and torn that it was no longer good for its original purpose, but they wanted it as a memento of the adventure.

As the bear had not had time to meddle with the food laid out by the girls, they were not so badly off after all, although it was exasperating to have to go without the fish, whose appetizing aroma was still in the air.

"Just when they were done to a turn, too," said Walter gloomily. "I wish the old rascal had choked on the bones."

Having recovered everything else, even to Aunt Betty's lunch basket, the picnic party pushed out some distance, and ate their lunch with an appetite that was the keener for their enforced waiting.

They were sure that Bruin's instinct would lead him straight back to the succulent repast that had been so rudely interrupted, and they were right, for a few minutes later he came loping along and plunged into the remnants of his fish dinner. He glared out over the water at his enemies, but his one experience had been sufficient, and he made no further attempt to take after them. He sniffed around disappointedly at the place where the other eatables had stood, and then lumbered away into the woods.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DRIFTING BOAT

"THERE'S gratitude for you," observed Jack. "We've given that bear a perfectly good dinner—even cooked it for him—and the only thanks we get is an attempt to kill us."

"Oh, well," said Paul, "we must forgive the old fellow. Bear and forbear, you know."

"You wouldn't think it was so funny," remarked Cora, "if he'd gotten away with the rest of the lunch, as well as the fish."

"Even then we needn't have gone hungry," returned Paul soberly. "The forest preserves are all around us."

"Even in the cities, one needn't starve if he has a sweet tooth," added Walter. "He always has the subway jams."

"I declare," said Cora, "it's a pity the bear didn't get you boys after all."

"*We* may get *him* yet," said Walter. "I'm not willing to let those fish of mine go unavenged."

Perhaps we can get some guns from Joel and round this old fellow up. It certainly would do me a lot of good to have his skin for a rug."

"He may have his own ideas about that," replied Bess. "You'd better let well enough alone."

"I see we're not the only ones on the lake," remarked Cora, pointing to a small boat about a mile away.

"Some fellow out fishing in a rowboat," pronounced Jack, after a moment's examination. "Let's go down that way and see what luck he's having."

"He doesn't seem to be fishing," observed Belle, as the *Water Sprite* turned in the direction of the rowboat. "In fact, he seems trying to attract our attention. There, he's waving at us. Let's hurry. Perhaps he's in trouble."

Jack sent the *Water Sprite* flying at full speed, and the distance between the boats rapidly narrowed.

"Upon my word!" cried Belle, "I believe it's Mr. Morley."

"So it is," acquiesced Cora.

"I don't see any oars in his boat," said Paul.

"Looks as though he were adrift," remarked Walter.

When he was within a few yards, Jack shut off the engine, and the *Water Sprite* drifted lazily down alongside the rowboat.

It was indeed the botanist, and he smiled cordially, if a little sheepishly, as they shouted greetings to him.

"I'm mighty glad to see you young people," he returned. "I rather thought it was your boat, but she looks so gay in her new coat that I wasn't sure of it."

"Where are your oars?" asked Jack.

"Thereby hangs a tale," smiled Mr. Morley.

"Come aboard and tell us all about it," replied Cora. "We'll fasten your boat to the stern and pull it along."

Mr. Morley climbed on board, helped by willing hands, and Walter secured the rowboat by a rope round a cleat in the stern.

"It's a simple story," laughed Mr. Morley. "Indeed, simple is the only word that properly expresses it. The fact is that I rowed over to the other side of the lake to find some specimens that I had reason to think were growing there. I got them all right and rowed back to the island. I put the oars out of the boat on the dock, and was going to get out myself, when something peculiar about one of the specimens attracted my attention, and I sat down in the boat to examine it more closely. I got so engrossed in it that I forgot everything else. Then suddenly I woke up to the fact that the boat had drifted away from the dock, and I was in the middle of the lake without

oars. I was trying to paddle with my hands, but wasn't accomplishing much, when your boat came in sight. I'm always glad to see you young folks, but I don't mind admitting that I'm especially glad to see you to-day."

"And we are to see you," returned Cora warmly. "How lucky it was that we made up our mind to spend to-day on the lake."

"We'll take you right over to your island," said Jack.

"It's awfully good of you," returned Mr. Morley. "I hope it won't interfere with any other plans you may have made."

"Not a bit," answered Cora. "As a matter of fact, I was going to ask Jack to stop at the island before we went home to-night. I wanted to scold you for not having come over to see us at Kill Kare, as you promised."

"I ought to be scolded," admitted Mr. Morley. "It hasn't been, however, because I didn't want to come. But I've had a very painful and difficult problem that I've felt I must solve and that has taken up all my time. But I shall certainly give myself the pleasure of calling before long."

"But you have had some very stirring adventures of your own since I saw you last, I understand," he continued. "What's this I hear about your being lost in the woods and rescued by an aeroplane, Miss Kimball?"

"It's true enough," smiled Cora, and she gave him some of the details. "But how did you come to hear anything about it?" she asked curiously.

"I was talking with Mr. Baxter recently and he told me about it," replied Mr. Morley.

"Mr. Baxter!" exclaimed Cora in surprise. "We know him very well and he was very kind and helpful while the search was going on. But I didn't know that you were acquainted with him."

"He's doing some special work for me," Mr. Morley explained, "and we often have occasion to consult together. He's a very clever man in his particular line."

Cora would have given the world to ask just then what Mr. Baxter's line of work was, but she felt that she might be prying. She waited expectantly, hoping that the botanist would mention it of his own accord, but he did not, and they were soon talking of other things.

Of course they told him of their adventure with the bear, and he laughed heartily at the way the brute had made away with their fish dinner.

"If he didn't leave you enough," he said heartily, "I'd be very glad to have you come up to the cabin with me and let me knock you up a meal."

"Oh, we had plenty without the fish," laughed Cora. "But thank you just the same. And by the way, we're going to have an outdoor spread on the lawn at Kill Kare before long, in recognition

of the kindness of those who tried to bring the prodigal daughter out of the wilderness. I expect that your friend Mr. Baxter will be there, and I'd dearly love to have you come, too."

"When you've fixed on the exact date, let me know, and I certainly will," replied Mr. Morley. "But here we are now, and there are the oars lying on the dock as a proof of my foolishness," he added with a laugh.

"You've put me under a great obligation," he said in parting. "I might have drifted along the greater part of the day, and perhaps the night, before I touched shore somewhere."

"One good turn deserves another," returned Jack, "and we haven't forgotten how royally you helped us on the day the *Water Sprite* got into trouble."

They waved to him as the boat drew away and shaped its course for Kill Kare.

"It's mighty lucky we came along, just the same," observed Belle. "Suppose, by any chance, he had drifted ashore and found our friend the bear waiting for him."

"And he without any oars in his boat," added Bess, with a little shudder.

CHAPTER XXII

THE GYPSY CAMP

CORA sat in a brown study as the boat hummed its way to the home landing.

"A penny for your thoughts, fair lady," said Walter, as he lounged lazily on the cushions.

"Why," said Cora, "I was wondering what were the special business relations between Mr. Morley and Mr. Baxter."

"Hard to tell," replied Walter lightly. "Perhaps Mr. Baxter is an author or an illustrator, and they're getting up a book together on botany, or something of the kind."

"I hardly think it's that," put in Jack. "I told you before that I thought he was a detective, and something that he said when Cora was lost makes me believe it all the more. He said that he knew the authorities in some of the towns, and they'd be glad to oblige him. That sounds to me more like a detective than an author talking."

"It does for a fact," agreed Paul. "But what

do you suppose a detective and Mr. Morley have in common?"

"Mr. Morley said that Mr. Baxter was doing some special work for him and that he was very clever," said Cora.

"Mr. Morley may have been robbed, and he may be trying to trace the robbers," suggested Belle.

"If it were only that, there wouldn't be much romance or interest about it," mused Cora. "But I have an idea it's something more intimate and personal than that."

"It seems to me that a robbery is a pretty personal and intimate thing," laughed Walter.

"Cora means that there's a heart interest somewhere in Mr. Morley's life," put in Bess, "but of course you boys are too sordid to understand anything like that."

As they passed the barn on their way to the bungalow they met Joel, who had just put up his horse. He seemed a bit out of sorts, and as this was unusual for him, it attracted their attention.

"What's the matter, Joel?" asked Jack.

"Nuthin' much," answered Joel. "But I jest heerd thet them pesky gypsies hez pitched their camp over near Wilton, an' it's kinda rubbed my fur the wrong way. I won't hev an easy minute till I know they've packed up their kits an' hit the trail again."

"The gypsies!" exclaimed Cora. "I wonder if it is the same camp we saw before."

"I suppose that's likely," returned Jack. "There isn't usually more than one camp in the same part of the country. They spread out pretty thin and keep apart. Besides, this fits in with the old pirate we saw the other day. He was prospecting, all right, and he picked out the vicinity of Wilton because he saw good graft in the town and the big hotel."

"Are you sure the news is straight?" asked Paul. "How did you hear about it?"

"Thet Baxter feller wuz drivin' by, an' he told me," replied Joel. "Wuss news I've heerd in a dog's age."

But if the news disgruntled Joel, it gave immense satisfaction to the rest of the party, especially the girls. They restrained their jubilation, however, until they got beyond Joel's hearing.

"Isn't it darling!" exclaimed Cora. "Now we'll have a chance to see that gypsy girl again!"

"All the good it will do you," jeered Walter. "That old horse thief will be on the job again, and keep her from talking with you. For some reason he seems to have it in for us."

"Let's drive over to-morrow," suggested Bess.

"I'd like nothing better," agreed her sister.

"Let's give Joel a pleasure and take him along," put in Walter with a wicked grin.

"It would make him froth at the mouth just to look at them," laughed Jack. "I guess in the interest of the public peace we'd better keep Joel as far away from them as possible."

"I'm just going to make that girl talk!" declared Cora emphatically.

"Not a very hard thing as a rule," chaffed Walter. "The difficulty is usually to keep the girls from talking. But these gypsies are a canny lot. For some reason or other they're suspicious of us, and they'll keep their eyes on us as long as we're in camp."

"Let's go in disguise," laughed Paul. "I'll make up as a clown."

"That wouldn't be any disguise," jabbed Bess.

"That ought to hold you for a while, old man," laughed Jack. "But let's go in to supper. I'm ravenous. We'll have plenty of time to think of the gypsies later on."

The next day was bright and clear, and shortly after lunch the cars were brought out and the party of young people started for Wilton.

There was a fairly good road most of the way, but there were patches that led through the woods that were rather rough, and over these the cars had to move more slowly.

"Suppose that bear of ours should turn up now," suggested Walter, as they passed through an especially dense portion of the forest.

"Don't speak of it," shivered Bess, looking fearfully on either side. "What on earth would we do?"

"Run for it, I guess," replied Paul laconically. "He'd have to be pretty fast to overtake us."

"But suppose he jumped out in front of us," said Belle.

"Then we'd have to put on full speed ahead and bump him," laughed Jack. "He'd be as surprised as the bull that tried to throw the locomotive off the track."

"And about as badly mussed up, I imagine," added Walter.

But at the same time he reflected that it might have been just as well to have brought Joel's rifle along, and in his secret heart he was relieved when the cars got out again on the open road.

They slowed up a little as they drew near Wilton, and scanned narrowly both sides of the road.

"There it is!" exclaimed Bess eagerly, pointing to a large opening in the woods a little to the right.

"So it is," acquiesced Belle. "I can see the vans through the trees."

"And we're not the only visitors, either," remarked Jack, as they caught sight of a number of well dressed people walking about the camp.

"So much the better," replied Cora. "We won't be so conspicuous, and the gypsies will be so busy

with the crowd that they'll take no special notice of us."

They left their cars under the shade of some trees and mingled with the throng.

"I give them credit for having picked out a good place," remarked Jack.

"They seem to be doing a land-office business," observed Walter.

"I don't see that old fellow around that has such a grudge against us," said Paul.

"Probably off somewhere cheating some farmer in a horse trade," grinned Jack.

They passed a group of rather fast-looking young men, who were talking and laughing loudly, and Bess suddenly plucked Cora by the sleeve.

"Don't look now," she murmured, "but after we get behind that clump of trees, take a look at that crowd we've just passed. There's an old acquaintance of yours there."

Cora did as directed and gave a start of surprise.

"Why," she exclaimed, "it's the man who tried to steal my purse!"

CHAPTER XXIII

A TANGLED SKEIN

BELLE followed Cora's gaze.

"Sure enough," she ejaculated, "it's that man Higby!"

"What do you suppose he's doing here?" wondered Cora.

"I suppose he's off on his vacation," hazarded Bess. "Likely enough he's stopping at one of the boarding houses in Wilton."

"You girls seem to be hypnotized," laughed Jack. "We'll get jealous if you keep looking at those chaps any longer."

"Do you see that man over there?" asked Cora, indicating Higby.

"The fellow with the rainbow tie?" asked Jack. "Yes, I see him. What of him?"

"That's the man who tried to scrape acquaintance with us, and nearly got my purse later on."

"I'd like to pick a quarrel with him and punch his head," said Jack savagely.

"You won't do anything of the kind, Jack Kimball," warned Cora.

"So that's our hated rival, is it?" asked Paul, looking at the young man with some amusement.

"I'll have his heart's blood," hissed Walter tragically.

"It's very queer," mused Cora. "Don't you remember, girls, how the gypsy girl nearly fainted when Bess happened to mention Higby's name? And here he is now in the same camp with her."

"I'd like to be near by when they meet," remarked Belle.

"Still looking for a mystery," chaffed Walter. "It beats all how you girls can pounce on trifles and make a mountain out of them."

"Give them an ounce of fact and they'll get a ton of romance," agreed Paul.

"We're not asking for your approval," retorted Cora. "This is a case that requires brains and naturally you boys are all at sea."

"I don't see that you've reached harbor anywhere," drawled Jack.

"Not yet," admitted Cora, "but that doesn't say we won't. I wonder where that girl can be," she continued, as she looked searchingly around.

"Perhaps they've sent her over to Wilton to tell fortunes there," suggested Paul. "These gypsies don't wait for business to come to them. They hunt it up."

"Oh, I hope not!" exclaimed Cora. "The only reason I cared to come over here was to see her."

But although they loitered about the place for another hour or two, they saw no trace of the gypsy girl.

They were agreeably surprised, however, to run across Mr. Baxter, with whom their relations had grown cordial since he had exerted himself so strenuously in the search for Cora. But despite the pleasant footing on which they stood, there was still that baffling sense of reticence that enveloped him in everything concerning himself.

"Come over to get your fortune told?" asked Jack with a grin.

"Not exactly," smiled Mr. Baxter, "though I'm always in the market for exact information."

"I hope you don't mean to imply that there's anything phony about the dope they hand out here," laughed Walter.

"We saw your friend, Mr. Morley, yesterday," remarked Cora.

Mr. Baxter shot a sharp look at her.

"Is that so?" he inquired. "How did you happen to know we were acquainted?"

"He told me so himself," returned Cora promptly.

"Well, that ought to be pretty good authority," replied Mr. Baxter.

But he showed no disposition to pursue the sub-

ject, as Cora had wished he would, and the conversation turned into other channels.

Mr. Baxter excused himself shortly, and the party strolled on. The girls bought bits of bead and embroidered work from the women, and had their fortunes told twice, spinning out the time in the hope that they would meet the girl they sought. But she did not appear, and at last they made their way to the cars, sorely disappointed.

They had gone only a little way when Bess exclaimed:

"Look! There's some one behind those bushes."

The others looked, but could see nothing.

"You're dreaming, I guess," remarked her sister.

"Nothing of the kind!" replied Bess indignantly. "I have eyes. And it was a woman, too. I caught a glimpse of her skirts."

"Well, suppose it is," observed Jack nonchalantly. "She has a right to be there if she wants to. The woods are free."

"I wish you'd get down and see," pleaded Cora.

"Oh, very well," replied Jack resignedly. "Since you girls are determined to butt in, I suppose I'll have to be the goat."

He got down from the car, but at that moment the bushes parted, and a girl stepped out into the road. She was gaily dressed and had a tambourine in her hand.

But there was no suggestion of gaiety in her face, which was distressed and bore traces of recent tears.

Cora uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

"Why," she cried, "it's the gypsy girl!"

The girl looked up and tried to smile, but it was a forlorn attempt.

The girls stepped down from the car and gathered about her. The boys would have followed, but Cora interposed.

"You boys drive on a little way and wait for us," she directed. "We'll be with you in a few minutes."

The boys looked at each other and laughed, but they obeyed. Then Cora turned to the girl.

"You seem to be in trouble of some kind," she said gently. "I wonder if we couldn't help you?"

The gypsy hesitated.

"Don't be afraid," urged Cora. "We're all girls together here, and we'll do anything we can to help you if you'll only let us."

The girl started to speak in her gypsy patter, and here Cora hazarded a bold stroke.

"Don't talk that way," she said with a winning smile. "I'm sure you can use as good English as we can if you want to."

The shot went home, and the girl flushed under the tan that bronzed her cheeks.

"I don't know why you think that," she said in a low voice.

"It was from something you said the other day when you were off your guard," replied Cora. "Of course I don't want to meddle with your affairs, but I do want that we should be friends. My name is Cora and this is Bess and this Belle. What is your name?"

"They call me Nina," replied the girl, who was visibly melting under the charm of Cora's personality.

"Now won't you tell us just what the matter is?" continued Cora. "I can see that you have been crying."

"I was frightened," answered the girl.

"Do the gypsies treat you badly?" asked Cora.

"No," replied Nina. "They're rough sometimes, but they're kindly at heart. But there was some one over at the camp to-day that I haven't seen for a long time, and that I hoped I never would see. I'm afraid of him. He didn't see me, but I saw him, and I ran away to hide in the woods till he should be gone."

The girls looked at each other, and the same name came to the minds of all three.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE KNOCKING AT MIDNIGHT

"I THINK I know his name," said Cora quietly. The girl looked at her in surprise.

"How can you know?" she asked.

"Because you nearly fainted the other day when you heard it mentioned," returned Cora, "and we saw that same man over at the camp to-day. His name is Higby."

The girl started violently, but whether she would have admitted it they did not know, for just at that moment a call came from the depths of the woods:

"Nina, Nina!"

"My people are looking for me!" exclaimed Nina. "It wouldn't do for them to find me here talking with you. They're suspicious of everybody. I'll have to go."

"But we must see you again," said Cora. "We simply must. Can't you come over to our place and have a long talk with us? We live at Camp

Kill Kare, only about four miles from here." And she hastily gave the needed directions for finding the way.

Again the cry arose from the woods, but nearer this time.

"Nina, Nina!"

"Perhaps I will come," said Nina hurriedly. "But you had better not come over to the camp again. If they suspect anything they will shut me up in one of the vans until they go away. Good-bye," and she scurried away into the woods.

The girls looked after her regretfully and then climbed into their car and drove ahead to where the boys were waiting for them with more or less patience.

"Well, how did you amateur sleuths make out?" asked Jack, as they drew alongside.

"Foiled again, judging from their faces," observed Paul.

"The committee reports progress and asks to be continued," chimed in Walter in his best parliamentary manner.

"I thought only women were curious," said Belle scathingly.

"You boys drive on," directed Bess. "This is a matter for us girls to settle."

"We're clearly in the second-fiddle class," grumbled Jack, as he threw in the clutch and took the lead.

"Wasn't it the most exasperating thing?" observed Bess, as the girls settled down for a "comfy" talk. "Just as we were on the very point of finding out perhaps about that Higby, she had to go."

"Goodness knows when we'll see her again, if ever," sighed Belle pessimistically.

"I'm glad she has the Kill Kare address anyway," replied Cora. "She may come over to see us. But if she doesn't, I'll find out some way of getting in touch with her again."

"Well, as Walter said, the committee has made some progress anyway," said Bess.

"I don't see where," put in her sister. "We don't really know any more of her story than we did before."

"Not of the real story, perhaps," admitted Cora, "but we know some things now, where formerly we only suspected them. We know, for instance, that Higby is the man she's afraid of. She didn't actually admit it, though I think she was about to, but his being there to-day and her hiding make it practically certain. It just couldn't be a mere coincidence.

"Then too," Cora continued, "we know that she can speak perfect English when she wants to. And she has the accent of an educated girl."

"But that doesn't prove she isn't a gypsy," said Belle. "I've heard sometimes of gypsy fathers,

especially the chiefs of tribes, sending their daughters to good schools. I suppose at the time they intend to keep them away from gypsy surroundings altogether. But then the wild feeling in their blood comes out and they drift back to the camp life again."

"I know that happens sometimes," agreed Cora thoughtfully, "but it's very rare, and all the chances are against it's being true in this particular case. And then, too, the blue eyes the girl has show that she isn't of gypsy birth."

"But even if that is true," objected Belle, "I don't see what good we can do the girl by getting mixed up in this. If she's with the gypsies, she may be there of her own accord. She seems to be treated well enough. She didn't say anything about wanting to get away from them."

"She hasn't had time to tell us very much yet," answered Cora. "But we're letting the boys get too far ahead of us," and she put more speed into her car and soon caught up with them.

The next day the rain came down in torrents. It beat in a perfect deluge on roof and windows, and even swept in on the big capacious porch, so that outdoor life of any kind was out of the question.

But it could not dampen the high spirits of the party at Camp Kill Kare. They had been so constantly on the go that the little interval of forced

inactivity was not after all unwelcome. The girls were able to catch up with neglected bits of sewing. Then there was the library stocked with choice books, and one of the girls read aloud while the others worked.

The boys ensconced themselves in the barn with Joel, where the old backwoodsman regaled them with stories of his adventures in the earlier days when he had been one of the most noted guides in the Adirondack region.

After supper a big wood fire blazed on the open hearth and took the edge from the damp chill that sought to invade the house. The girls furnished music, and boys and girls together sang songs until they were tired.

The girls had been asleep for an hour or more when Cora was awakened by a knocking on the front door.

"Who on earth can that be at this hour of the night?" she wondered, as she raised herself on her elbow to listen.

The knocking continued, and as nobody else seemed awake to answer it, Cora slipped out of bed, donned a kimono, and softly woke Bess and Belle.

"What is it?" asked Belle drowsily.

"Go away and let me sleep," murmured Bess, turning over on her pillow.

"There's somebody knocking at the front door,"

explained Cora. "I'm going down to see who it is, and I want you girls to go with me."

"It may be a burglar!" exclaimed Belle.

"You might get hurt!" protested Bess, wide awake now.

"Nonsense!" laughed Cora. "Burglars don't usually announce their coming by knocking at the door. Besides, I'll find out who it is before I open. Slip on your kimonos and come along."

They obeyed, not without some inward shrinking.

"Don't you think you ought to wake the boys?" asked Belle, hesitating on the landing.

"I couldn't do that without waking the whole house, Aunt Betty and all," answered Cora. "Besides, the boys would have the laugh on us and try to patronize us. We don't want to be looked on as a lot of cowards."

Both of the sisters seemed to be perfectly willing just at that moment to be included in that ignominious category, but they were accustomed to follow where Cora led, and they went down the stairs, their slippered feet making no noise.

The knocking still continued, though it seemed weaker than at first.

Cora, with her lighted bedroom candle in her hand, softly approached the door, which was secured by a double lock and also by a heavy chain.

"Who is there?" she asked.

"Please let me in," came in a woman's voice from outside.

"Who are you?" Cora repeated.

"Nina," was the answer. "Oh, please let me in!"

Cora unfastened the chain and turned the key, and as she opened the door the gypsy girl staggered into the bungalow.

CHAPTER XXV

FALSELY ACCUSED

THE Motor Girls caught the gypsy girl as she was about to fall and seated her in a chair.

"You poor, poor thing!" exclaimed Cora.

"Out in this pouring rain!" ejaculated Belle.

"And drenched to the skin!" added Bess.

The newcomer presented a pitiable appearance. Her gaudy apparel was torn and bedraggled, her wet hair clung about her face, and she was gasping with exhaustion.

"I had to come!" she panted. "I was afraid!"

Cora had formed her plans with quick decision.

"We must keep this to ourselves for to-night, girls," she said in a low voice. "She'd be miserable and embarrassed if the boys should come down. We'll tell them all about it to-morrow. The first thing to do is to get her up in our rooms and give her some dry clothes. Then we'll get her something to eat and drink and put her to bed. She can tell us her story later."

"Oh, you are so good!" exclaimed the gypsy girl, covering her face with her hands.

As quietly as they could, they helped her up the stairs and rummaged in their closets for towels and clothes. Then they all set to work, and in a little while the newcomer was dry and warmly dressed in civilized garments.

She was of about the same size as Cora and Belle, and they had no trouble in fitting her out. Bess would have been equally willing to contribute some of her belongings, but her "plumpness" forbade.

It was astonishing to see the difference wrought in Nina by the assumption of the garments of ordinary life. She looked in them, as Bell remarked, "to the manner born," and when they had dressed her hair in the way they wore their own, there was little trace of the gypsy left, except her bronzed complexion.

She gave a little cry of feminine delight as they made her look at herself in the mirror.

"Oh, it's so long since I wore clothes like these!" she murmured.

"And now," said Cora, as she gazed with pleasure on the transformation that had been wrought, "we'll all go down to the kitchen and see what we can get in the way of something to eat."

They stole downstairs and the girls ransacked the larder. They found plenty of cold meat and

bread and preserves. Belle got out a chafing dish and scrambled some eggs, and Cora brewed a pot of fragrant coffee. Bess set the table and they all gathered about it and ate heartily.

The girls thrilled with the romance of it all. The drenching storm, the midnight hour, the gypsy visitor, the feeling that they were involved in a mystery made them tingle. Then, too, the knowledge that all this was taking place while the other occupants of the house were unconscious of it gave a touch of the surreptitious and the clandestine that was not without its charm.

The gypsy girl of course was somewhat self-conscious, as she could not help being under the peculiar circumstances, but the girls noticed that her table manners were good, and they were more and more confirmed in their conviction that she was not what her dress and surroundings had made her appear.

She spoke mostly in monosyllables and only when addressed, and every once in a while they could see the look of anxiety and fear come into her eyes that they had noted the day before.

"Well," said Cora at last, when they had finished sipping their coffee, "I guess we'd better get up to bed. You need a good night's rest," she continued, addressing their guest, "and we'll fix you up a bed in our rooms. In the morning you will be in better shape to tell us all you care to."

"But you ought to know all about me before you do that," replied Nina. "It isn't fair to you. Perhaps after you have heard why I came you may regret taking me in."

"We'll never be sorry for that," declared Cora emphatically; "and I feel sure you've never done anything you ought to be ashamed of."

Nina's face glowed with gratitude at the generous speech.

"Oh, I never have!" she cried. "But I've been accused of doing it, and that sometimes in the eyes of the world amounts to nearly the same thing."

She had dropped all pretence to gypsy speech now, and spoke like any other American girl of good breeding and education.

"I think I'll tell you now," she cried impulsively. "That is, if you're not too tired to hear it?"

"Not a bit," answered Cora, who was inwardly delighted.

"I'm just dying to hear it, to tell the truth," said Bess frankly.

"So am I," echoed her sister.

"You are right," began Nina, "in thinking that I am not a gypsy. I am an American girl and I was born in this State. And my name isn't Nina either. But it will have to do for the present, because until this matter is cleared up, I don't want to tell my real name."

"My mother and father died when I was quite young, and I went to live with an uncle. He was an unusual man, and though no doubt he was fond of me in a way, our natures were too different for us to get along well together. I was hot tempered and hasty and we often quarreled. It was after an exceedingly bitter quarrel that I made up my mind that I would run away from home and earn my own living.

"I got a position in a department store, with just enough pay to keep body and soul together. Again and again I was tempted to go back and make things up with my uncle. But that silly pride of mine kept me from doing it. Oh, how I wish I had!

"There had been a number of thefts in the store, and the manager was furious. He told all the employees that the next one who was caught would be sent to jail. Up to that time he had usually been content with discharging them.

"One day I was called to his office and accused of having picked up a lady's purse that had been laid on a counter. A man who was employed in the store said that he had seen me take it.

"I was frightened nearly to death, for I had never even seen the purse. But it was found lying under my counter, as though I had hidden it there. I cried and begged and protested, but it did no good."

"You poor child!" exclaimed Cora, deeply affected.

"The manager must have been a brute!" cried Bess indignantly.

"I suppose he thought I was really guilty," said Nina, "and he was exasperated by the many other thefts. I thought I should go mad. He took up the telephone to call for a policeman, and in that minute when his back was turned I slipped out of the door down the stairs and into the street.

"Some way I got into the outskirts of the town, where I found a camp of gypsies. I don't remember much after that. I suppose I must have collapsed. But they took me in and nursed me, and when I came to consciousness again some days afterward, I found that the caravan had moved on and was in a strange town a good way off from Roxbury."

"Roxbury!" exclaimed Cora.

"That's where I had been employed," went on Nina. "When I found myself lying in a gypsy van, with an old woman taking care of me, I did a lot of hard thinking. With the gypsies I was safe. Nobody would think of looking for me there. But anywhere else I was likely to be arrested at any minute. And I would rather have died than gone to jail.

"So I stayed on with them and learned to tell fortunes. I didn't know what else to do, and

gradually I got used to it. But I've never been really happy there. And I've watched everybody who came to the camp, for fear he might be an officer."

Cora reached over and took the girl's hand comfortingly in her own.

Quick tears evoked by the sympathetic action sprang to Nina's eyes, but she brushed them away and went on:

"I never met anybody I really knew until yesterday. Then I saw a man whom I had known in Roxbury. That's the reason you found me hiding in the woods. I was relieved when I went back to find that he had gone.

"But to-day he came upon me unawares, and he knew me through all my gypsy disguise. He threatened to expose me, to hand me over to the police. I was wild with fright. You had been kind to me and I thought of you. I waited to-night till the camp was asleep, and then I slipped out. And here I am."

CHAPTER XXVI

COUNCIL OF WAR

THE girl had told her story in such a simple and straightforward way that, combined with the candor in her eyes, it carried conviction to the sympathetic hearts of her hearers. And their eyes were moist as they listened to the pelting of the rain and thought of the fugitive making her way through the lonely woods, her footsteps dogged with terror.

She sat looking from the eyes of one to the other, and was comforted by what she saw there.

"You poor, dear girl!" cried Cora, springing up and giving her an impulsive hug. "You've had an awful time of it, but we're going to do our best to straighten things out and make you forget your troubles."

"Of course we know who the rascal was that threatened you," said Bess. "It was that man Higby."

"He was the one," admitted Nina.

"You say that he used to know you in Roxbury," put in Belle. "Was he employed in the same store with you?"

"Not only that," returned Nina, "*but he was the man who said that he saw me take the purse!*"

"He, of all men!" exclaimed Bess. "When I saw him in the very act of slipping back Cora's purse after he had taken it!"

"But why should he have tried to put the theft on you rather than anybody else?" asked Belle.

"I think he had a grudge against me," answered Nina. "He had been too familiar in his manner toward me, and I resented it. He was angry and told me that I would be sorry. But I don't think that would have been enough to make him go as far as he did. He worked in the same part of the store that I did, and I have thought since that perhaps he took the purse himself. Then, when the search for it was coming close to him, he got scared, and slipped it under my counter so that the blame would fall on me."

"A cur like that oughtn't to be allowed to live!" cried Bess in hot indignation.

"Of course, I don't *know* that he stole it," qualified Nina; "but his eagerness to put the matter on some one else makes me think he might have done so. And even if he isn't a thief, he knew that he was telling a falsehood when he said he saw me take it."

"But why should he threaten you now?" asked Belle. "The whole matter has blown over long ago as far as he's concerned, and he's in no further danger. I can understand how the coward might have lied in a moment of fright to save his own skin. But why should he be cold-blooded enough to keep on persecuting you now?"

"He's got some purpose in view," replied Nina, "and he wants to make me help him by threatening to expose me if I don't. I don't know what it is, but from what I know of him I'm sure it's something wrong. He said he'd see me again tomorrow and tell me his plan. I told him I wouldn't have anything to do with him or his plans, but he only grinned and said he guessed I'd rather help him than go to jail. I ran away from him then, and later on I made up my mind to come here."

"You did just exactly right," declared Cora. "We'll take care of you until everything is made all right. But you'll have to keep close to the house, so that nobody besides ourselves will know you're here."

"How about the gypsies?" asked Belle. "Won't they make a search for you?"

"I suppose they will," answered Nina. "You see," she said with a little pitiful smile, "they regard me as one of their assets. I make a good deal of money for them from the visitors to the

camp. But apart from that, some of them are really fond of me, and I feel the same way toward them. They took me in when I was in extremity, and in their way they have been kind. I never want to go back if I can help it, but I will always have a feeling of gratitude and affection for them."

"And so you ought," returned Cora. "But all the same your natural place is with your own people, and you mustn't have your life spoiled. We'll set things in motion the first thing to-morrow morning—or rather this morning," she smiled, as she looked at her watch. "Good gracious, girls, it's after two now! We simply must get to bed."

They put out the light and stole upstairs, where, after bestowing Nina comfortably, they were soon sound asleep.

But Cora was astir early, for she wanted to forestall the appearance of Nina at the breakfast table by notifying Aunt Betty and the boys of all that had happened in the night.

"A miracle!" cried Jack, as he came down the stairs three steps at a time, followed by Paul and Walter. "Cora is up before the rest of us!"

"Fair goddess of the rosy-fingered dawn,"

quoted Walter.

"You boys stop your nonsense now and listen to me," smiled Cora. "I've got something very important to talk over with you."

"The new fall styles, perhaps," chaffed Walter.

"It's about the gypsy girl," began Cora.

"The gypsy girl!" exclaimed Jack, pressing his hand to his brow. "Where have I heard that name before?"

"She's upstairs sleeping," said Cora simply.

The effect was electric. The young men dropped their foolery at once.

"What do you mean?" asked Jack, staring at her.

"You're joking!" cried Walter.

"How did she get here?" queried Paul.

"She came last night about twelve o'clock," replied Cora, quietly enjoying the shock she had given. "I heard her knocking at the door, and got up and let her in."

"But why didn't you call us?" asked Jack.

"I didn't want to rouse the house," Cora answered. "I made sure that it was a woman before I opened the door."

"But that might have been a trap," reproved Walter. "She might have had confederates with her who would have forced their way in as soon as the door was opened."

"I didn't think of that," admitted Cora. "I knew it was Nina—that's the name she goes by—

and I took her in. The poor thing was drenched from head to foot and was nearly frightened to death. We gave her dry clothes and something to eat and put her to bed."

And then to the boys and to Aunt Betty, who had entered while they were talking, Cora told in detail what she had learned of the gypsy girl's story.

The others listened intently, breaking in frequently with questions. Aunt Betty was full of sympathy, though a little dubious about this new element brought into the life of Kill Kare.

The sympathies, too, of the boys were aroused, though their feelings took the form of bitter indignation against Higby. They would have jumped at the chance to form a vigilance committee and thrash him within an inch of his life, if it could have been done without disagreeable publicity for the girls.

As to the mystery itself, they were not as keenly interested as the girls were in solving it. They had a masculine hatred of seeming to pry, and they foresaw a whole lot of possible complications in the presence of the newcomer. But after all, their chivalry was aroused by the girl's plight, and they cheerfully promised to do all they could to get her out of it.

"On general principles I object to Kill Kare's becoming an orphan asylum," laughed Jack. "But

you can count on us, sis, to take off our coats and work like beavers to set things right. Eh, fellows?"

"You bet!" replied Walter in his somewhat slangy manner.

"Watch our smoke," prophesied Paul, and grinned broadly.

CHAPTER XXVII

A NARROW ESCAPE

CORA, greatly relieved now that things had been explained to the rest of the household, went upstairs to find that the other girls were up and nearly dressed.

Nina presented a very different picture from that of the night before. No one looking at her would think that she was different from any other girl who might be staying as a guest at Kill Kare. In a pretty white dress that Belle lent her, she looked charming.

She was naturally diffident and nervous at the prospect of meeting Aunt Betty and the boys. But their good breeding and kindness of heart smoothed over all difficulties. They laughed and jested at the table as usual, including her at times in the conversation, but taking care not to make her feel conspicuous. By the time the meal was over, they had succeeded very materially in putting her at ease.

For the benefit of the servants, it was given out that Nina was a friend who had arrived rather late the night before, and might stay at Kill Kare for some time.

"Let's hope that Joel doesn't get wise," remarked Jack, when he was alone with his chums. "I can imagine the old boy throwing a fit if he learns that we're harboring anybody connected with the gypsies. He loves them as much as a miser loves a tax collector."

"I don't think he'll catch on," replied Walter; "but if he does we'll tell him that our keeping her here is making the gypsies sore. That'll square things with him."

"I think it would be a good thing for one of us to run over to the gypsy camp to-day, to see if that Higby is hanging around," suggested Paul. "We might get a line on where he's staying and how long he's likely to be in the neighborhood. And then, too, we might be able to see whether Nina's absence has raised much of a stir in the camp."

"I'd like to get my hands on that Higby's throat," growled Jack. "Of all the unspeakable cads, he's the limit."

"He sure is," agreed Paul. "But we'll have to put on the soft pedal if we hope to find out anything. I'll try to strike up an acquaintance with him, ask him for a match, or something like that.

He's a shallow rascal, and it ought to be easy to worm something out of him."

"All right, Mr. Detective," laughed Jack. "Suppose you take that part of the work on you. In the meantime, I'll write a letter to Tom Willis, an old college pal of mine and Walter's, who lives in Roxbury, and ask him to make some discreet inquiries about that matter of the theft. Tom's a good old scout and he'll be glad to do anything he can for us. I want to find out whether a warrant was actually issued for the girl. If it wasn't, the girl is all right, and Higby can't make good on his threats. If it was, we'll have to get a lawyer, and try to have it quashed."

"How are you going to find out whether a warrant was issued for her, if you don't know her name?" asked Walter.

"That's so," replied Jack, a little dashed. "I'll go and have a talk with Cora. Maybe she can get the girl to tell her."

As a result of his hurried conference, Cora spoke to Nina.

"Jack wants to look up that old matter at Roxbury, Nina, and he can't do it unless he knows the date and also your name," she explained. "We don't want to pry, but you can see yourself that we can't do much if we go groping round in the dark."

"It happened a year ago last May," replied

Nina, "and the name to look for is Helen Holman. It isn't my real name, but it was one that I chose to take when I was afraid my uncle would be hunting for me."

"And you don't feel quite ready yet to tell me your real name?" inquired Cora kindly.

"Please don't ask me yet," pleaded Nina. "When once I know that there's no danger of disgracing it, I'll be glad to tell you."

Cora did not press her, but returned to Jack with the information he wanted.

"Thank you, sis," he said. "By the way, are you girls planning to use your car to-day? If not, Paul would like to drive over to the gypsy camp in it. Walter and I want to take my car over to the garage in town to-day to have a few repairs made. These roads have played the mischief with the tires. Besides, I want to lay in a stock of gasoline. I noticed this morning it was running low."

"We won't want to use my car to-day, and Paul's perfectly welcome to it," replied his sister. "And if you're going over to Milford I wish you'd bring back some things we're short of for the spread. You know that comes off to-morrow night. I'll give you a list of the things we want."

"Sure thing," replied Jack.

But an hour later, when he and Walter drove off, his mind was so full of the measures he meant

to take in behalf of Nina that he forgot all about Cora's list.

She herself did not remember it until Jack had been gone for an hour or more. And by that time Paul had driven off in her car to the gypsy camp.

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Cora in deep vexation, "how could I have been so careless? We just can't get along without those things."

"Just for a lark let's go over to Milford ourselves," suggested Bess.

"And walk?" asked her sister.

"Why not?" said Bess. "I haven't done as much walking as I ought to lately, and it's a great thing to help me reduce. Besides, I don't believe it is more than four miles, and it's a splendid day for walking."

"We might follow the railroad through the cut," said Cora. "That takes off some of the distance. Come ahead, girls, and let's do it. We'll probably get there before the repairs are finished on the car, and we'll give the boys a surprise party."

Belle agreed after a little more urging, and the girls put on their hats and sallied forth, leaving Nina in charge of Aunt Betty, with strict injunctions not to show herself at any of the windows.

At a distance of a mile and a half from Kill Kare ran a single track, narrow-gauge railroad that served a number of tiny towns scattered

through that region. It was a leisurely, go-as-you-please affair, and, as a railroad, was considerable of a joke. The rolling stock consisted of a couple of locomotives that had seen better days and a string of dilapidated cars that had been discarded on other roads. Time schedules were honored in the breach rather than in the observance, and one or two trains a day each way wheezed along at their own sweet will.

But it served as a short cut to Milford, and the girls chose to go by way of it on that account, and also because it ran through a sort of gorge that cut off the hot rays of the sun.

But if it was delightful overhead, as much could not be said for the walking underfoot. The ties were split and irregular, and the slag that lay between them was trying to the feet.

"I feel sorry for any stranded actors who ever have to walk these ties," complained Belle.

"I think it's smoother on the outside of the track than where you're walking," suggested Cora. "Suppose you try it."

There was a switch in the track just at that point, and as Belle tried to step over the rail as Cora had suggested, her foot slipped and was caught in the frog.

She would have fallen to her knees if Cora had not caught and steadied her.

"Did you hurt yourself?" asked Bess.

"Only scraped my ankle a little," answered her sister. "But I may have ruined a perfectly good shoe."

She tried to pull her foot from the frog, but found that she could not.

"Pull a little harder," urged Cora.

Belle tried again, but with no success.

"The sole seems to be caught in a spike or something," she explained.

Bess gave a little scream.

"Oh, hurry, hurry," she cried. "Suppose a train should come along!"

And just at that instant they heard a long shrill whistle from up the track.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WAYLAID

A SCREAM broke from all the girls, and Belle nearly fainted.

They could not see more than a hundred feet up the track, for at that point the road curved round a bluff. But they could see a column of smoke rising high in the air and the humming of the rails grew steadily louder.

Cora was pale as death, but she rose to the emergency and took command.

"Run up the track as fast as you can, Bess," she directed, "and wave your hands to the engineer to stop."

Bess was off at once and Cora turned to Belle.

"We have plenty of time, dear," she said soothingly, "if you do exactly as I say. Keep your foot perfectly still while I unlace your shoe."

By a great effort of will, Belle did as she was told, leaning her hand for support on Cora's shoulder as the latter knelt at her feet.

Bess rushed madly up the track and around the curve, and her eyes dilated with horror as she saw the train, now only a few rods away.

She screamed wildly and waved her hands frantically.

Her voice could not be heard above the rattle of the train, but fortunately her signals were seen and the engineer shut off the steam and put on the brakes.

With a great hissing and clamor the train swung round the curve and bore down upon the girls.

Cora had been working desperately, but her fingers seemed to fumble with the laces as though she were in a nightmare. But she steadied herself and finished her task. Then she sprang to her feet and pulled with all her might, Belle aiding her, and the foot slipped from the shoe, while the girls fell back against the side of the gorge, well clear of the track.

The train had slowed rapidly, but when it came to a full stop it was not more than twelve feet from the abandoned shoe.

The engineer and fireman jumped down and rushed forward. A glance at the shoe told the whole story.

"That was a narrow escape, ladies," remarked the grizzled engineer. "It's lucky I saw those signals. I hope that you're not hurt."

"More scared than hurt," answered Cora,

"I don't wonder you were scared," he replied; "but you were mighty plucky just the same. Lots of girls would have lost their heads and just screamed or fainted. I'll get this shoe out of the frog for you."

He handed the shoe to Belle, and he and the fireman clambered back in the cab. The train was a freight, for which the girls were grateful, as they were spared the embarrassment of a trainful of passengers crowding around.

They rested a little after the train moved on, for the strain, though brief, had been very great. Then Belle resumed her shoe.

"Don't you think you had better go straight home?" asked Bess solicitously.

"Oh, I guess not," replied Belle, who was getting back some of her color. "Besides, we're much nearer to Milford now than we are to Kill Kare."

"Perhaps we had better go on," judged Cora. "The boys will bring us back in the car, and if we should miss them, we'll hire a rig of some kind to get home in."

"I guess Bess will need it more than any of the rest of us," said Belle.

"I never ran so fast in my life," answered Bess. "If exercise is all that is needed for reducing, I ought to have lost pounds," and she smiled, although the smile was tremulous.

They were lucky to find the boys still waiting

at the garage, and the surprise of the latter at their appearance was only equalled by their consternation at the danger Belle had run.

"You girls need a guardian," said Jack severely, "and Walter and I elect ourselves unanimously for that position."

"It's a mighty hard job," sighed Walter. "Our hair will be gray before our time."

"Don't tell Aunt Betty about this adventure," warned Jack. "She must be on the verge of nervous prostration already, and this would just about cap the climax."

They made the purchases for which Cora had come, and drove rapidly back to Kill Kare.

They found that Paul had returned some time before.

"Did you find out anything?" asked Cora eagerly, as she stepped from the car.

"Not such an awful lot," answered Paul. "The gypsy camp was certainly stirred up about something—little knots everywhere jabbering away in that outlandish lingo of theirs. Didn't seem as keen on grafting from visitors as usual. I suppose of course that Nina was the storm center. They're pretty badly roiled, I imagine."

"But how about Higby?" asked Bess.

"I saw him, too," replied Paul. "Jostled against him, excused myself in my well known irresistible manner, and got into conversation with

him. He's staying over at Wilton on a two weeks' vacation. He's used up nearly a week of it now. Doesn't seem to be very keen about going back, though. Knocks his job to beat the band. I guess he's sore on the management."

"Probably the real reason is that they're sore on him," said Jack.

"I noticed the manager looked at him very suspiciously the day that Cora lost her purse," observed Belle.

"Perhaps he's near the end of his rope and knows it," said Paul. "He was quite anxious to know how far we were here from the Canadian line. He may be getting ready to emigrate."

"He'd be a great loss to the United States," sniffed Bess contemptuously.

"We could probably stagger along without him," drawled Walter.

"Did he have anything to say about Nina?" asked Bess.

"Only in an offhand way," returned Paul. "He remarked that there seemed to be a great hulla-baloo among the gypsies, and that he understood one of the girls was missing. But I noticed that he kept looking sharply all around as though he was hoping to see some one."

"Well, there's just one thing to do," remarked Cora, "and that is to keep Nina close inside the house until the coast is clear. Higby will be gone

in another week, and the gypsies never stay long in one place. And in the meantime we may get word from Roxbury that will tell us what the next step must be."

The following night was the one set for the celebration of Cora's safe return, and the weather was all that could be asked for. The spread itself was a great success. The girls had decorated the lawn with strings of Chinese lanterns on lines that swung from tree to tree, and the tables were abundantly spread with food that both in quantity and quality roused the enthusiastic appreciation of the men from the sawmill, who composed the major portion of the guests. Mr. Morley made a little speech and Mr. Baxter came out of his shell long enough to offer a witty toast to Cora and the other girls. The boys sang some rollicking college ditties, and the phonograph, brought out on the porch, discoursed such music as was not commonly heard in that remote region. It was a jolly, sparkling evening that they all enjoyed, and it was late when the gathering dispersed with three rousing cheers for their hosts.

The days flew swiftly by until a week had passed. Nina had fallen readily into the life at Kill Kare and the girls had become greatly attached to her.

The danger that threatened her seemed to be vanishing. The gypsies, after unavailing search

and inquiries that had reached as far as the bungalow, had departed. Paul had motored over to Wilton and found that Higby had left the place where he had been boarding, and the presumption was that he had returned to Roxbury.

Under these circumstances the restrictions that had held Nina to the house seemed unnecessary. Besides, she felt the confinement more on account of the outdoor life to which she had been accustomed.

Soon she ventured into the woods round about, though seldom going far from the house. But as her sense of security increased, she occasionally went farther. And one afternoon, when her temerity had taken her far beyond her usual limit, she turned a bend in the path and came face to face with—Higby!

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PLOT

THE girl screamed and tried to run, but Higby was too quick for her and seized her roughly by the arm.

"No, you don't!" he cried. "You're not going to get away from me as easily as all that, after I've been watching you for days. You've got to listen to what I have to say."

"Let me go!" cried the girl, pulling away from him.

"Go where?" he leered. "To jail? You'll go there mighty quick if I care to have you go. All I have to do is to notify the police at Roxbury and you'll be behind the bars in forty-eight hours."

The girl turned white as the awful vision that had haunted her for a year past seemed to be assuming form and substance. She had no doubt that he could do as he threatened.

"What do you want with me?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Now you're getting a little more sensible," he remarked. "Sit down on that bank and I'll tell you what I want.

"Those folks you're staying with are pretty well off, aren't they?" he inquired.

"How do you know where I'm staying?" she asked.

"That's my affair," he said brusquely. "I know you're staying at a place they call Camp Kill Kare. Quite a change from the gypsy camp," he sneered. "You're flying high these days. But that's neither here nor there. Those boys and girls there seem to have plenty of money. There'd be quite a haul there in the way of cash and watches and diamond rings and other jewelry, I suppose."

She grasped his meaning and drew away from him in horror.

"You don't mean to say that you're thinking of robbing the house!" she exclaimed.

"You're pretty squeamish for a jailbird," he sneered.

"I'm not a jailbird!" she cried passionately. "I never did a dishonest thing in my life!"

"They say differently at Roxbury," he taunted.

"Yes!" she blazed out. "But why? Because you told a falsehood about me! You know you didn't see me steal that purse!"

"Let's cut this short," he said impatiently. "I'll put the whole thing in a few words. I'm not

going back to Roxbury. I need money, and need it bad! Those folks at Kill Kare have plenty of it, or what can be turned into money, and I want you to help me get it."

"I never will!" she cried defiantly.

"It's either that or jail," he said menacingly. "And I know that you won't choose jail when you come to think it over. I'll give you a day to make up your mind. You be here at this same time to-morrow, or it will be the worse for you."

She pleaded with him to renounce his purpose and leave her in peace, but he laughed at her and went away with a parting threat.

Nina retraced her steps to the house in a state of great agitation. She felt sure that Higby was in desperate earnest and would denounce her to the authorities if she should fail to do his bidding. But she would have died before helping him to rob her benefactors.

What resource then was left? Flight! Once more to become a fugitive—to live under the ban of the law—to fear any moment the touch of an officer's hand upon her shoulder.

The castle of dreams that she had been building in the last few happy days seemed ready to dissolve in mist.

She tried to assume her usual cheerful manner when she entered the house, but the girls noticed at once that she was pale and anxious.

"What's the matter, Nina?" asked Bess. "You're as white as though you'd seen a ghost?"

"I hope you haven't run across any of the gypsies!" exclaimed Cora, in quick apprehension.

"Nothing like that," Nina asserted.

"Nor Higby?" asked Belle.

Nina faltered, and at this the others jumped to their feet in great excitement.

"Do you mean to say that that cur is lurking around here yet?" demanded Cora.

Nina broke down then, and told them all the details of her meeting with Higby.

The girls were aghast at the plan to rob the house.

"He's getting along fast," remarked Belle bitterly. "He's graduating from the sneak thief to the burglar class."

"I wonder what we ought to do," said Bess. "It's too bad the boys are away to-day. I suppose the police ought to be told about it."

"There's nothing yet to tell," said Cora. "He'd simply deny that he ever suggested anything of the kind to Nina. It would be only her word against his, and she has no witnesses. Besides, for revenge, he'd blurt out all about that Roxbury matter."

At this moment the maid announced a visitor, and Nina vanished as Mr. Baxter entered the room and greeted the girls cordially.

"Sort of an Adamless Eden here, I see," he laughed, as he noted the absence of the boys.

"Yes," smiled Cora, "they're out for a spin to-day by themselves. But I expect that they'll be back before long."

"I'm rather sorry they're not here," said Mr. Baxter, "as I wanted to talk over a matter in which you're all interested. I refer to the young lady who has been staying with you for the last week or two."

For a moment the sickening fear came to Cora that Mr. Baxter might be an emissary from the Roxbury authorities.

"Well, what about her?" she asked warily. "She's a dear friend of mine who is paying me a little visit."

"But not a very old friend," said Mr. Baxter quietly, "since two weeks ago she was telling fortunes in a gypsy camp."

A cry broke from the lips of the girls, and they looked at each other in great trepidation.

"Now, now," said their visitor with a genial smile, "she hasn't the slightest thing to fear from me. In fact, I think I'm going to prove one of the best friends she has."

"Oh," breathed Cora in relief, "I hope you will! The poor girl is sadly in need of all the help she can get."

"I have been looking for her for a long time

past," said Mr. Baxter. "At least I feel reasonably sure that she's the girl I'm after. And my only object in finding her is to restore her to the home and relative that she ran away from in a fit of youthful anger. I suspected that I had found her in Nina the gypsy girl. But now that I have seen her dressed in civilized clothes and compared her with the pictures in my possession, I feel practically sure of it. Still, I won't know positively until I bring her and my client face to face."

"O," cried Cora, "is your client——"

"There, there!" Mr. Baxter checked her. "No names, please. If I am right in my identification you'll know all about it before long."

"I think I can name him now," smiled Cora.

"Never jump at conclusions," advised Mr. Baxter. "But what I called for especially to-day was to warn you that your house was to be robbed."

"So we heard only a few minutes ago," replied Cora. "Thank you very much for the warning, though."

"So she told you?" remarked Mr. Baxter with a gratified smile. "That's good. I am glad that she has defied that fellow's threats. I was concealed near by and heard the whole conversation."

"What do you think we ought to do?" asked Cora.

"I think," replied Mr. Baxter, "that the girl had better meet Higby to-morrow and pretend to

fall in with his plans. I will be on hand and hear all he says. In the conversation that goes on between them, Higby may say something that reveals her innocence and his guilt in that Roxbury affair.

"She can arrange to let him into the house at night, which is evidently the part he wants her to play in the theft. We'll be waiting for him when he comes, and we'll give Mr. Higby the surprise of his life."

CHAPTER XXX

BROUGHT TOGETHER

THE plan met with the hearty approbation of the girls, and they accepted it, subject to the approval of the boys.

And when the latter reached Kill Kare and learned what was afoot, they agreed to it enthusiastically. They all felt toward Higby as they would toward a particularly noxious reptile. And this latest attempt to make the victim of his falsehoods a criminal brought their feeling of detestation to the highest pitch.

"Oh, won't it do me good to get a whack at him!" gloated Jack.

"He'll be as safe with me as if he were on a battlefield," remarked Walter.

"We'll fix him!" declared Paul.

Nina had been told that Mr. Baxter had overheard the conversation with Higby, but had been given no hint that the detective was looking for her to restore her to her home.

At the appointed time on the following day, she met Higby, whose face lighted up with an evil smile as he saw her appear.

"Thought better of it, did you?" he remarked jeeringly. "I knew mighty well you would."

"It's vile of you to make me do a thing like this," protested Nina.

"You weren't so particular at Roxbury," he taunted.

"Why do you harp on that?" she cried furiously. "You know I didn't steal that purse. I believe you did it yourself."

"Suppose I did?" he grinned mockingly, in a way that was itself a half admission. "I deserve credit for being smart enough to make somebody else the goat. But let's get down to business. I want you to tell me all about the way the rooms are laid out and where the cash and jewelry are kept."

She gave him an idea of the plan of the bungalow, and promised to leave a door open from the back leading into the kitchen. He was to come a little after midnight.

That afternoon and evening, life took its ordinary course at Kill Kare, as far as external signs were concerned. They knew that Higby was probably watching the house from the shelter of the adjoining woods, ready to take flight at anything which might indicate the betrayal of his plans.

Not that he anticipated betrayal. He was confident that the deadly fear that Nina had of jail would keep her his accomplice, even though an unwilling one. But one could never be too careful when engaged upon such a venture as his.

He noted the girls sitting on the porch with their sewing, or picking flowers in the garden, saw the boys go motoring and return, heard the party singing songs after supper on the steps of the veranda. There was nothing to excite suspicion in the slightest degree and he exulted as he thought of the rich haul he expected to make.

His jubilation would have been less keen, however, had he noted the care with which Joel loaded his favorite revolver and had he seen three men who slipped into Kill Kare under cover of the darkness.

One of the three was an officer who had been brought over from Milford to make the expected arrest. The other two were Mr. Morley and Mr. Baxter.

The botanist had been told of the robbery that had been planned, and had been invited to be "in at the death." But he had not received the slightest hint of the presence of Nina in the house. The detective did not care to risk a possible disappointment. Then, too, he had a sense of the dramatic, and schooled himself to wait.

As for Nina herself, she kept carefully out of

view, as she always did when there were visitors at Kill Kare.

Eleven o'clock was the usual hour of retiring at the bungalow, and no deviation from the custom occurred on that night. A few minutes after eleven the lights were out, and Kill Kare seemed to be peacefully sleeping.

The door at the rear had been left unlocked, as arranged. The members of the party, all fully dressed, waited in different rooms the outcome of the drama.

"He'll probably stop in the dining room to look over the silver," remarked the officer, Thompson by name, to Mr. Baxter. "Do you think we'd better nab him then?"

"Don't be in too much of a hurry," advised Baxter. "He'll probably look for his biggest haul in the sleeping rooms upstairs. Give him plenty of rope and let him hang himself. Besides, the farther he gets into the heart of the house, the harder it will be for him to escape in case any of our plans go wrong."

The girls were seated in the dark in their own rooms, their hearts beating fast with excitement.

"I suppose we'll be only lookers on," remarked Bess in a low tone. "The men will do all the work."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Cora. "We may come in somewhere."

"What was it you put in that cedar chest you're sitting on?" asked Belle curiously.

"I'll tell you later," replied Cora. "And, girls, stay right where you are, whatever happens."

In the dark she busied herself with something at the entrance of the room.

Shortly after midnight, Higby slipped in through the rear door. He had taken off his shoes and was in his stocking feet.

It was pitch dark within, and he moved with such feline stealthiness that he had reached and stolen up the stairs before the watchers were sure that he was not one of themselves.

The jewelry of the girls was the chief object that he had in view, and he went to their rooms first. But as he stepped inside, he tripped over a wire that extended from one side of the door to the other, at the height of a foot, and fell headlong with a crash that jarred the house.

Cora reached into a chest, and clutching an acetylene lamp that was already lighted, turned its blinding glare right into Higby's eyes.

"Don't dare to move!" she commanded.

Higby, not knowing how many weapons were turned upon him, and unable to see anything in that pitiless blaze, lay perfectly still. The next instant he was in the grasp of the men and boys, who handled him none too gently and jerked him to his feet.

"Trapped by a woman!" he growled, as he saw the wire over which he had fallen and the lamp that Cora still held.

"You're trapped all right," declared Thompson, as he snapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

"And in for a good long term in the State Prison," added Mr. Baxter. "We have you dead to rights, Higby, and you haven't a show in the world. But you may be able to have some years cut from your term if you help now to undo a wrong."

"What is it?" muttered Higby, his craven soul clutching at straws.

"That theft at Roxbury that you charged Helen Holman with committing," Baxter reminded him. "You stole that purse yourself, didn't you? Speak up now. Nothing but the truth will help you."

"Yes," admitted Higby, sheepishly.

"I thought as much," remarked Baxter. "Take him away, Thompson."

There was a wild hubbub after the officer had driven away to Milford with his prisoner. All the boys and girls were laughing and talking at once.

"Who is this Helen Holman you were talking of?" asked Mr. Morley.

A sudden hush fell on Cora and the others, as they listened for Mr. Baxter's answer.

"A girl that has lately been leading the life of a gypsy," replied Mr. Baxter. "She's a very interesting character. Miss Kimball," he continued, turning to Cora, "will you ask Miss Holman to step here for a moment?"

Cora darted into the adjoining room, and returned an instant later leading Nina.

She and Mr. Morley looked casually at each other. A startled look leaped into the eyes of each. There was a gasping cry, and the next instant she was in his arms, sobbing as though her heart would break, while he held her tight as though he never intended to let her go.

"Alice!"

"Uncle!"

The girls were sobbing openly, while Mr. Baxter blew his nose vigorously, and even the eyes of the rollicking boys were momentarily dimmed.

Mutual explanations followed, together with mutual requests for forgiveness. Both had reaped the bitter fruit of hasty tempers, and had been made to realize during their separation how really dear they were to each other. The reconciliation was complete, and the Motor Girls were delighted beyond measure at the part they had played in bringing it about.

During the remainder of her stay at Kill Kare, Alice Morley grew more and more deeply attached to the girls to whom she owed so much,

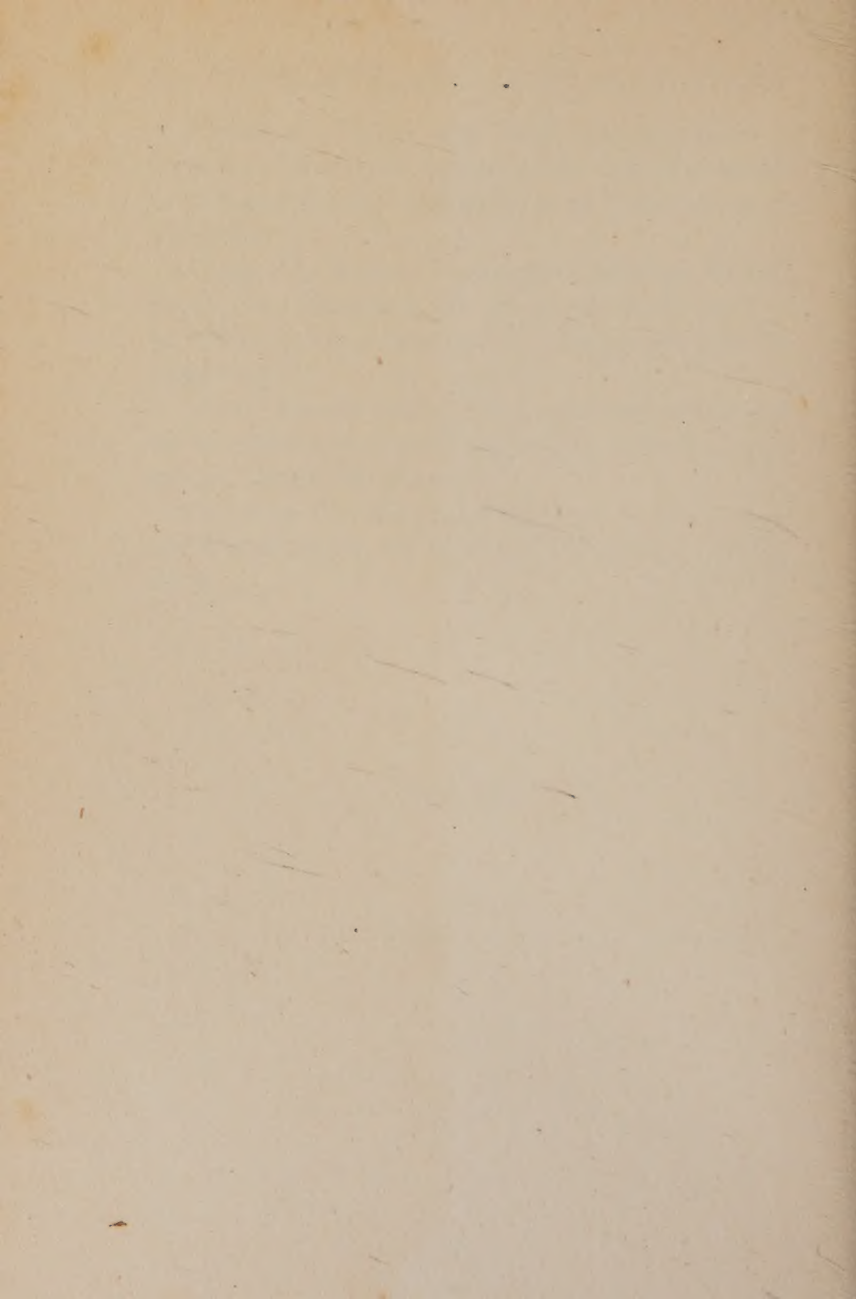
and when she finally went back with her uncle to Saxton, it was with the promise that she would soon make a long visit to them at their homes in Chelton.

"Dear old Chelton!" remarked Belle, as, shortly after the departure of Alice, they themselves turned their faces homeward. "How glad I'll be to get back."

"Yes," agreed Cora. "But you must admit that we've never spent such a glorious outing as this one at Camp Kill Kare."

And with this delightful memory as their cherished possession, we bid farewell to the Motor Girls.

THE END



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